Swimmin' with the Fishes by Bluest_Planet

Category: Danny Phantom
Genre: Additional Warnings In Author's Note, Amnesia, Boats and Ships, Choking, Danny Fenton Loves Space, Danny Fenton is a Good Friend, Danny Fenton-centric, Developing Friendships, Drowning, First Impressions, Fishing, Fountain of Youth, Gen, Ghost Cores (Danny Phantom), Ghosts, Good Sibling Danny Fenton, Good Sibling Jazz Fenton, Grim Reapers, Halfa | Half-Ghosts (Danny Phantom), Hurt Danny, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Jack and Maddie Fenton are complicated parents lets analyze the consequences of that, Mayor Vlad Masters, Memory Alteration, Memory Loss, Mistaken Identity, Mystery, Not Beta Read, Original Character Death(s), Original Character-centric, Other, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, River Styx (Ancient Greek Religion & Lore), Singing, Song Lyrics, Tags May Change, Trans Danny Fenton, Vlad Masters Being an Asshole, and ur mortality post death as it is corroded, by time like a rugged stone turned smoothe by rapid waters, ghosts used to be people and I think it would be interesting, takes a while before we see the other characters sorry, to explore the inherent mourning of your sense of self
Characters: Danielle "Dani" Phantom, Danny Fenton, Jazz Fenton, Original Fenton Character(s) (Danny Phantom), Sam Manson, Tucker Foley, Vlad Masters
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Summary:

When Danny wakes up somewhere on a small shanty boat floating on an inescapable river deep in the ghost zone, he has no recollection as to how he got there. He doesn't know who he is, how to get home (and if he has one?), and if he's really dead or not. All he as are some faint memories of someone telling him to find a fountain in order to save everyone. So he goes to the one other person stuck with him on this ride for the answers.

Only this ghost seems a bit... Off.

(Or, Danny has brief amnesia, self reflects, forgets he's half alive, befriends a fisher ghost, helps them both regain their memories while they try to get back to the living world, all while on a really long and treacherous boat ride. Fishing ensues!)

Edit as of February 23rd, 2023: Currently on hiatus while I work on another project.

Edit as of May 27th: Still on haitus while I edit, but prospective update within a month or two :^)

Relationships: Danny Fenton & Danielle "Dani" Phantom, Danny Fenton & Jazz Fenton, Danny Fenton & Original Character(s), Danny Fenton & Tucker Foley & Sam Manson, Danny Fenton & Vlad Masters, Original Character(s) & Original Character(s)
Comments: 13
Kudos: 24

1. Watery Grave

Author's Note:

> Here's my silly little fanfic <3 hoping to keep it in the 5-10 chap range, but im just 'going with the flow' heheh! thanks for clicking btw! Ik ocs aren't everyone's jam and thats okay were all just here for a good time. again, since its for fun an experimenting things like relationship tags might change. Carry on!

It all starts with a question.

"The Fountain of Youth is real?"

An arrogant and sly smile creeps onto Vlad Plasmius' horrid vampire-like face, with long sharp fangs, blood-red eyes, and all the glee in the world. As if he had won another of his twisted game, a game Danny wanted no part of; his grand prize as the winner being the world served to him on a silver platter, nay, a *gold* platter.

Honestly, he was just as entitled and gluttonous as every other rich jerk born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Only instead of selling out his employee's livelihoods and hoarding money like a selfish dragon, he had to *personally* come after his mom out of the entire human populace, and wrecking his normal life too. Couldn't he catch a break? A time-out? He had better things to do, like a study session he planned with his friends!

Ugh, to think he'd actually *want* to study. Maybe Jazz and Sam were rubbing off on him too much these days.

Regardless of his personal life, Vlad laughs at Danny and chastises him like a child, "oh you sweet and ignorant child, *of course,* the fountain is real! Just as real as you, me, the Ghost Zone and all its inhabitants. What, did you forget the infinite possibilities of the *Infinite Realms?"*

He titles his head and taunts the other, currently restrained and powerless, halfa, "come on, Daniel; I expected more of you by now."

Danny reigns in a growl, and instead snarkily asks, “alright; so what? Did you really lure me all the way out here just to tell me that? ‘Cause I really doubt it– and frankly, even a fountain of youth sounds a little farfetched, even for ghosts.” He sarcastically added, “Y’know, ‘cause we're dead? *Kinda*. Very much the opposite of youth– well, *you* are, anyways…”

Vlad scowls at his words, which probably weren’t the smartest thing to say when he was trapped and pretty roughed up already from fighting earlier. The older halfa seems to lighten up, though, no doubt thinking up a way to turn the entire situation for the worse.

He straightens up and nonchalantly looks over his shoulder at the rushing river behind him. His smile getting more hideous as it grows. Danny suppresses a shudder, a happy Vlad was a dangerous Vlad; you never knew what he trick had up his sleeve. It didn’t help that the frootloop was already spouting crazy, and there definitely was something off about that river, and not in a good way. It felt… *wrong.*

At first, he had been after Plasmius when he caught wind of him coming up with a new scheme so soon after his stint with the Infinimap and Vortex. Tucker found some *interesting* recent land purchases in Vlad’s name. All of which surrounded a relatively normal river, *on paper,* it seemed. Again; can’t trust the fruitloop on anything, if he wanted it, it *had* to be special.

So off Danny went, ruining their study night. Following a suspicious trail, he figures was deliberately set up by his rival, but had no other choice but to follow. His ghost sense was acting up that day, the portal was giving off weird energy but no ghosts, it was the *full moon* tonight, and it only got worse and worse the closer he followed.

When It led out of Amity, it put him and his friends at odds as to what to do about it. Tucker offered to stay behind, so he could remain in contact with his tech and keep an eye on the portal with Jazz. Danny was hesitant to leave them behind with a potentially volatile portal, but Jazz reassured him that they could handle it and if things got bad; they’d call him immediately while he scoped out Plasmius. Sam wanted to go with him as back up, but he pointed out that whatever Vlad was doing, it felt a lot more dangerous than usual. And they were going far from the city, if something went

wrong it would be a while before she could get help if something happened to him. So In the end, she backed down, but not without dedicating herself to helping the others and readying herself to come running if he needed it. Not that he didn't appreciate the help though, in fact, it was comforting to think of her presence with him in hindsight.

Considering, the river was even giving *him* the heebie-jeebies.

His senses went crazy when he first got sight of it, his living half freaked the *hell* out. What was left of his self-preservation instincts practically screaming to get away from it, like it'd carry him away, and he'd never come back. The hair on his body raised and goosebumps prickled his skin, and a bad black pit formed in his stomach the closer he got to it.

'You're marching into your death,' His brain told him, *'run away! Stay away!'* it screamed.

All things considering, he wasn't that unnerved by his living half not liking his dead half's normalcy. Used to it even, that slight apprehension with every fly, blast, and wail. Every trip into the ghost zone had him silently screaming inside; he'd gotten use to ignoring the flight response. Now, it was like a background noise, or buzz under his skin humming with amped up adrenaline ready to go.

No, what scared him was his *dead half's reaction.*

It wanted to go *in*.

And float away forever.

It was a deeply unnerving calm and intense longing to just *let go.* So he could float away, blissfully in peace and ignorance. Just be totally swept away with not a care in the world and be done with it all for an eternal slumber. Rightfully his for the taking at long last.

'It's okay, you've done enough,' it whispered,

*'Give in, and **Rest** in me.'* was the river's silent siren call.

It endlessly reverberated in his head, beckoning him closer and

closer. It just sounded so *soothing,* so much louder than the other part that screamed to run for the hills.

He didn't like how little he felt in control of himself at that moment.

So it was fortunate, then, that Vlad had snuck up on him and instigated a fight to distract him from the waters. Until he used his newly recreated stupid 'Plasmius Maximus' and trapped him in a tangle of stinging barbed nets when he was caught off guard.

He struggled against his constraints at first, but quickly stopped when he noticed the barbs would only dig in further if he wiggled too much. Some were already lodged into his skin and blood-letting green onto dark grass slowly. He was thankful his healing was already kicking in despite his powerlessness, albeit slowly. It was enough to not worry too much about, hopefully. Although, Sam and Jazz might have something to say about it when he got back.

Yeah, *when* he absolutely got back.

Because he promised them all, that he'd come right back when he was finished.

He just has to beat Vlad first.

Easy.

"Light headed there, are we, Daniel? Careful there now; wouldn't want to lose too much of your precious liquid emerald– we'll need it if we are ever to reach the fountain." Vlad gloated, much too pleased with himself.

Danny glared at him for waxing poetic about his *blood,* like a *creep*. His voice slightly slurred, "you're… In'insane… No, s-such thing…"

The older halfa tutted, "that's where you're *wrong*, dear Daniel; tell me, you love the stars, don't you?" he sneered, "the fanciful and decorum expanse up above? I don't see the appeal– not when everything worth paying attention to is right here, in my sight and reach… almost."

He fakes a weary sigh, "you have such childish dreams– now *that*, I

would call insane for believing in reaching for. But what am I to do?" his voice turned darker, "you're still a child who refuses to see what really matters, No, your vision is obscured with how you gleefully stick it in the clouds!"

The halfa stomped closer, roughly manhandling the younger and dragging him in the dirt to the run down docks.

To the river.

Something in Danny snapped, wanting to break free– but it was quickly curb stomped by the weighty, almost crushing force of unnatural calm and tranquility. Like a haze or drug, sapping out all fight. Vlad only laughed at his fruitless struggle.

Just as they reached the edge, it felt like invisible hands kept trying to reach out an drag him in under the dark water. Vlad held him by the back of his collar, forcing him to look at his warped reflection in the murky depths. From here he could see the full moon; big and bright in all its glory, but it too was just a reflection.

Vlad crooned at his helplessness, taunting, "don't worry, it will be all over soon, but maybe if you'd like, I could tell you a story to calm your nerves?"

Danny could barely move, let alone tell him off. But he took his silence as a yes anyway.

"Well, I'm sure you know this: next month there will be a *once in an eon*, event," he gestured to the moon's reflection, "some have dubbed it a *Purple Moon.* On account of the fact that it is both a Blood Moon and a Blue Moon, completely forgetting that it will also be a Super Moon– but that's just semantics, isn't it? I think I prefer the name, 'Royal Moon' I've heard some folks mention. But it hasn't stuck, pity."

Danny would roll his eyes if he could, for one this wasn't much of a story as it was blabbing, and he already knew more than him on the topic. He actually made plans to see it with his friends, plans he was dead set on seeing though to.

"But wouldn't you know it? Turns out that this moon already has a

name in the Realms, a script dubbed it the *Reaper's Moon.* It has a remarkable story behind it, really! So it starts with a reaper– there are many a psychopomp believed to take up the role. Maybe they take turns, or maybe they're all the same with a new mask, and perhaps… It's just one dutiful ancient. No one really knows."

The older halfa continues, "The text was old and faded, but the gist I got was: The Reaper collects lost souls during the one time he is free to roam the living world. During a full moon he is released, a full month before the actual celestial event when the 'gates' are open, and delivers them to The Ferryman to be shipped off into their final resting place. A… rather morbid version of Saint Nick, I suppose. Regardless, when he is free to roam– that's a two-way street, Danny."

Danny feels something drop in his chest as he listens; unable to stop him and whatever he's planning to do with this 'Reaper's Moon'. Something he's *never* heard of before, even from Frostbite.

Vlad is ignorant of his dilemma as he finishes,"See, The Ferryman must wade through the hellish rivers that compile the *Sea of Souls*, in order to deliver his precious cargo. The same river that spews from the Fountain of Youth's mouth. Now you see where this story leads?" he said expectantly.

When Danny still refuses to respond to his story, he victoriously spits–

"Seeing as The Reaper is notorious for viciously guarding the gates on the special day; you'll be… *hitching a ride*, and getting rid of that Reaper for me. You'll clear me the perfect path to the fountain."

Remarkably, he mustered up a scoff, "As if I'd *ever* do anything for you!"

Vlad just villainously crackles, "But you will, and you won't even know it!"

Even under the lax spell of the water, he growled at his enemy, *"No–!"*

Vlad tightens his hold on Danny, jerking him around, so the barbs

lodge themselves in deeper to draw more blood. He uses his ecto-beams to singe and burn his wrist and neck as he holds him over the water, causing Danny to grit his teeth in pain. Vlad loosens his grip on his arm to reach for his pocket and pull out… a gold coin?

“Be a dear, and *open wide!*” He yells with a manic grin.

Danny is like a rag doll, suppressed by nets tight enough to cut off circulation and by the awful subduing energy of the river. Free for Vlad to do with as he pleases.

A gloved hand painfully pries his mouth open and bruises his tongue as Vlad shoves the pristine yet vile coin into his mouth and then forcibly keeping it shut with his palm like a muzzle. It clangs and clatters against his sensitive teeth, it's cold, coppery, and *heavy.*

He's panicking, trying not to accidentally swallow the *fucking gold dabloon and choke-*

That he doesn’t notice Vlad’s mysteriously supercharged fist aimed for his head until it’s too late.

His brain is moot- dark spots flutter in and out of vision, and he can feel himself starting to black out, with pure confusion and instinctual fear coming with him.

Vlad gets one last hit that does him in– this time aimed at his core with a new gadget he hadn’t even notice before. He gets a glance at the mechanical monstrosity, tipped with a sharp looking injector, before it spears past his chest and ghostly flesh and punctures through into his core. Sending a shockwave through his *entire body.*

Burning electric currents burns him from the inside out, and it's like something *cracks, fractures, and shatters* deep inside.

“Find the Fountain at all costs, Danny, it's our only hope to save everyone.” A voice whispers in his ear.

And then he's gone– watery arms lunge for his body and drag him under the depths, all evidence of his existence eagerly washed away by the rapids.

Like all the other Lost Souls.

2. Dead in the Water

Summary for the Chapter:

> "Keep fighting shade! It makes it all the more merry!"
>
> The Fisher King celebrates when the thrashing only gets more intense as one last hurrah before he fishes out the shade he's caught.
>
> Black and white emerge from the water, just an absolutely sopping wet beast of a boy.
>
> (In which Danny is quite literally a fish outta water? Hm.)

Notes for the Chapter:

> Enjoy!

The Sea of Souls has always been, and forever will be, a dangerous venture.

Countless rivers across dimensions flow into it, spanning across and bridging the gap between the Living and the Dying, Dead, and the Deadly. Here, no one is quite sure where one place beginning and where another ends, it simply *is.* And in the Old Fisher King's opinion, that's what made it so awe-inspiring.

The vastly distinct energies of each river emulsify into one another and brewing the potent Sea– *although it is anything but a simple sea, rather than an unpredictable horizontal waterfall, in his humble opinion*– created a cascade of nigh infinite possibilities. Many a ghost have tried to chart the Sea's waters, or chronicle the odd meteorological phenomena surrounding it. From the expected raging hurricanes, the sacred silence and stillness of a pond, and the sudden, acid-like,

volatile waters of a volcanic crater lake.

The Fisher King hummed, casting out another reel into liquid crystal blue.

'Now,' he thinks, *'now is the time to enjoy the peace while it lasts.'*

Before the Sea tries to claim him as its own, in its cold embrace disguised as a tsunami. *Or bathe him in a blood rain, and crust him in a scorching sandstorm, even freezing him solid in ice to be used in someone's drink.* The Sea was like a loathsome mother with no one to return her affections; dragging anyone in their weakest moments under her bosom, suckling from her without question and without awareness to the world around them. If you falter for even one moment, all would be lost to you.

A tug on his line. Strong, but not undoing. Especially not for a man of his caliber.

He is a *King,* after all.

'Well, I was, *once.'* He ruefully reminisces.

Sometimes he wonders of the Holy Grail's fate; but he mostly prays that the chalice was lost to time. That would be the best outcome for humanity, he believes.

He wars against the tides as his line becomes taut, reeling in whatever he's caught from the Sea's latest bounty. The quiet from before is broken by loud splashing and his grunts between pulling his fishing rod closer to the boat.

The dark shadow caught on his hook flounders as it tries to escape back into the Sea; he laughs as the distance between them gets shorter with every second.

"Keep fighting shade! It makes it all the more merry!"

The Fisher King celebrates when the thrashing only gets more intense as one last hurrah before he fishes out the shade he's caught.

Black and white emerge from the water, just an absolutely sopping

wet beast of a boy.

His thick, large white beard obscures the wry smile on his face. Most would find such a young kid as a tragedy, but for the King, he couldn't care less. He was far too used to the possibility of children dying to be fazed by it; it was the norm when he was alive.

A bad reminder makes his core twinge with sadness and regret anyway, not of the boy, not of his own experiences. But for one he cares for dearly.

'Perhaps,' he ruminates as he overlooks the latest of the Reaper's generous catch and releases, *'perhaps he can still be saved, and save the others by doing so too.'*

The boy's chest is cracked in on itself like a glass box, allowing him to see his fragile core inside; it is beyond fractured, with small shards missing. Droplets of green ooze and congeal from within the fractures, filling in the cracks and dripping out at a concerning speed… His skin is semi-translucent, you can see the vague outline of obsidian black bones underneath.

A ghost's body rarely preserves organs– a core is all that is needed, growing an ectoplasmic body around with a skeleton to both support and shape itself, much like a human body. Of course, depending on the individual the body can vary; there is so little in common between ghosts that at times what is true for one, is not for another. Then you have the mystery that is ectoplasm being an entirely different science to even begin trying to understand. Refusing to follow the Living's rules on matter and malleable to whatever design fate desires. Hence, his observations now:

The ghost boy's frozen core, was turning his own body into a parody of ice as a concept. Making a joke out of him; frostbitten face, see through skin like a frosted ice sculpture– an easy to shatter parcel, with freezing cold breath, and fluffy snow like ectoplasm filling his insides where viscous neon green substance should be. Parts of him were even melting in places.

His core was failing him, not forming the correct person it should be.

The Old Fisher King sighed, “there is truly no rest for us wicked, son.”

There’s still a chance to fix things, all the Lost Souls that The Reaper harvest from the Living Realm are. It seems like this one just missed the Ferryman’s last trip. They were lucky the old king agreed to catching any stragglers instead of enjoying the day on his boat.

The large ghost pulls the boy off the hook and into the small boat. He dwarfs the small one by a large stretch, but he is gentle, and oh so careful not to worsen his condition as he shambles inside the shanty’s cramped space.

The Fisher King shushes the other ghost child inside, trying not to wake them from their stirring slumber at the new inclusion to their crew. They relax at his affections, dropping right back into their own core.

“Alright now let's see where to put ‘cha…” he murmurs to himself.

He carefully rolls the boy onto one side, practically holding him on his hip like a babe with how big their size difference is. It's uncomfortable with how hunched in on himself he is with the low ceilings, but he makes do while he grabs what he needs from the chest by the desk. Inside was an extra hammock he rarely needs to use.

‘Hamaca,’ A voice, not all that dissimilar to the other ghost child's own, reminds him. His adopted grandchild was always telling him to say it right.

He strings it up on built in hooks besides the other, and delicately sets the boy down on it. Grabbing a spare, thin and old blanket to tuck him in. Now, he wouldn’t have to worry about the rolling rapids for now; the hammock would keep him safe from falling and damaging his core further.

‘He needs time, and nurturing.’ The old ghost thought, *‘I can offer no such thing, but* they *likely can…’*

He spares a look and considers his grandchild’s capabilities for a

minute; they would be ecstatic to have another ghost to talk too. And if there was one thing about cores he understood, it was connection and emotions. His grandchild's infectious, positive, friendly attitude would be sure to set them both on a path for healing, and hone their unique abilities.

Not to mention, help fulfil their Love-driven Obsession…

The Fisher King nodded to himself, beyond pleased, imagining with how his plan would come together.

So after admiring the two ghosts in his protection, he sets out to write a letter down for his beloved grandchild. Writing down all that he knows and the mission he's inscribing to them before he sets out again.

He and they would be the boy's ferrymen and take him where he needed to be. To become who he *needs* to be, and fulfil his final journey to everlasting peace.

"Danny Be careful! Make sure you–"

"I know, I know! Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Just… just come back to us safe, okay?"

"I will, I promise you–"

"And! Don't forget to–"

“What?”

“I said, don't forget–”

“What?”

Electric green eyes sparked open, blinking wildly as they took in the world around them. It was so *dark*. An old squeaky lamp hanging from a chain swayed above him, with no light coming from it. The room was illuminated by the circular window on the only visible door. Half of it was blocked from sight with a large sheet, what was visible still was the following:

Big barrels in the corners filled with who knows what, an old desk covered with stationary, with bunches of crumpled paper balls littering the surrounding floor. Rusted metal pans and buckets were stacked neatly besides different kinds of fishing rods lying against a wall, and lastly–

A frankly *impressive* amount of wild looking tackles mounted for all to see.

Actually, it was more like *obsessive*.

His observation were cut short, however, as all the *pain* seemed to finally hit him all at once.

His skin felt like it would come apart at any moment; that horrible stinging feeling you get when your skin is too dry and hurts to stretch out. It was like there were a buncha tiny scratches and cuts stinging all over his body. The scratchy and itchy blanket on top of him did nothing to help. His fingers, nose, lips, and ears also felt like *ice*. And

trying to wiggle them as an instant no with how stiff they were.

He felt heavy yet floaty at the same time, it was very nauseating– especially with how it seemed like the room was *moving*. But he couldn't tell if that was just his splitting headache or actually happening. God, he needs to close his eyes before he barfs something up and wrecks his torso even more– the walls were starting to close in and warp around him…

And his *chest*. Oh, *man,* did someone run him over? It felt like someone used a battering ram to break open and crack all his ribs like glass, then took his heart, and replaced it with sharp pointy *icicles.*

Overall, he felt absolutely horrible.

He was exhausted, he's freezing, unsure if he was so hungry he was nauseous, or too nauseous to eat, let alone if there was anything *to* eat or drink– he felt like someone just beat the ever loving shit outta him, and! He had no idea why he's chilling in a hammock, or how he even got here, frankly.

Or who he even *was.* What was his name?

Fuck, his head hurt really, really, bad.

Still, he tried not to give in to his rising panic. Instead, trying to channel it into something productive, because something was telling him to get up and do something. He did not want to be lying around like a sitting duck for whoever must've hurt him to come back.

But he couldn't move. It already hurt enough just to look around, and it would probably hurt a whole lot more if he even dared to move. At least it didn't seem like there was anyone around? Maybe he could just try to rest up until he felt better?

Up until now, his hearing caught nothing but creaky wood against the muffled sounds of rough waves and loud splashes outside. And some minor thundering, was it storming? Was he on a beach? That was then followed by howling wind whipping past the door, and was that… *singing?*

"*Ten minutes ago,*

I met you,

And we murmured our how-do-you-do's…"

He could feel himself getting tense, there *is* someone here.

Behind the curtain, the voice was calm, low, and melodic—greatly contrasting the raging storm outside. The singer noncommittally sings and hums the tune, skipping over some lyrics and repeating others. As if they didn't totally know the song.

"*Ten minutes ago, I saw you.*

I looked up when you came through the door.

My head started reeling;

You gave me the feeling

The room had no ceiling or floor."

They hummed again, only this time it sounded like they were getting closer to him.

He flinched when the curtain was drawn back just as they were about to repeat, "*Ten minutes ago, I met*– oh, you're awake."

He felt small under their indecipherable gaze. Anxious because he couldn't run or do anything to stop them from hurting him if they wanted too.

Just judging from his resting spot, he noticed how much taller they were than him. Which was easy to say, if his vague memories were anything to go off of, because everyone was taller than he was. *Who were 'everyone' he was thinking of?* And dressed in an oversized, rubbery, midnight blue hooded raincoat/poncho… *thing*, that hid their facial features. In one of their white gloved hands *–oddly reminiscent of his own, he noted–* was a comically big wooden oar with crude but cutesy fish carved in it. The sheer size of it and the fact it was hit by the light from outside being the only reason why he could

see it so clearly.

Their hooded head curiously tilted to the side and asked, “*hello?* Please tell me ya don't 'ave any head trauma, I don't think I can fix that…”

He didn't answer, unsure of whether to trust them or not. At his silence, the singer walked up quickly to his bedside to wave a hand and snapped their fingers in his face, checking for his reaction.

He yelped at the sudden movement, and leaned away from them as much as his body would allow, “I'm fine! Jeez… please don’t do that again…” he weakly replied.

The figure ahead of him visibly relaxed, “Oh good! That's a relief, wouldn’t wanna be unsure, y'know? Especially after the state I found ya in; I was practically gluing ya back together piece by piece!” They said cheerfully.

His eyes widened in alarm, “wait, *what-?* ”

They laughed, “oh God, there was *so* much blood an' you were *so* outta it! You're lucky mi abuelito found ya! I mean, all the way out '*ere?* No one ever comes out here!”

He gaped, “where are we–”

“—I think you might be the first person I've seen in *days!”* They interrupt again, “or has it already been a few weeks? Months? Can't be *that* long, right? Ah man, I'm terrible with time…” they rambled off.

He waited for them to finish, as he honestly had no other option, being as roughed up as he was. Their loud, excited voice sending waves of pain like he was listening to forks scraping a plate because of his sensitive headache. But, at least now, he could tell they weren’t hostile? Kind of? What they were saying was worrying him a bit, though; it was painting a terrifying, mismatched picture.

Once it sounded like they were finished, he opened his mouth to speak–

“Oh my God! Wait! Didn't I see the Seal Woman three weeks ago? An' Davy Jones had to’ve been, like, at max a year ago? *I coulda sworn–!”*

He watched them in disbelief as they continued to talk nonsense over him, until he finally yelled, *“HEY!* Could ya stop talking over me?!”

The other quickly shut up, and sheepishly fidgeted with their oar, “ah, sorry, bad habit–tend to speak to myself a lot… not often I see other folk, y’know. Anyways, Go ahead?”

He let out a weary sigh, somehow it felt like getting any answers was going to take a *lot* of effort.

In a tired voice, he asked, “what happened to me?”

“You don't remember? That’s okay, we all sometimes forget! I know I do…” The responded.

“No!” he yelled, “it's not okay! *What happened?”*

He couldn’t see it, but at that moment, he could have sworn up and down that they were smiling underneath that hood as they answered:

”You died!”

3. It’s Rose Water-Like

Summary for the Chapter:

> Their laughs tittered off, getting a hold of themselves and conceding, “okay, okay, whatever you say, buckaroo.”
>
> He frowned, “is ‘buckaroo’ really, the best you could come up with? What are you, a cowboy?”
>
> Riviera rolled their eyes and stretched before sitting down on a nearby barrel and using it as a makeshift stool. They looked him in the eye and asked, “well it's not like ya gave me a name when I asked, so buckaroo it is! Besides, it's a fun word!”
>
> (Gender is fun when ur a ghost)

Notes for the Chapter:

> A bit on the short side, but enjoy!

”You died!”

In hindsight, maybe reminding a ghost who forgot about their death wasn’t their best idea.

But it's not like they did it to be mean! They’ve just been alone for so long that they haven’t really brushed up on their ghost etiquette…

‘Abuelito is gonna be so mad at me…’ They internally grimaced. Totally not paying any attention to their passenger, who was having an existential crisis and speeding through all five stages of grief at the moment.

He was currently at stage three: *anger*.

“*What do you mean I’m dead?!* I definitely don't *feel* dead!” He yelled, frantically kicking off his blanket, sitting up and gesturing to himself.

“Look! I–” his eyes widened, and he hissed in pain, “–ugh, Shouldn’t have done that– but *See?* God, it's like someone ran me over!”

A grim thought crossed their mind briefly*, ‘Maybe someone did.’*

The other ghost frowned and moved to pick up the sad rumpled blanket off the floor, folding it and hugging it close to their chest. That wasn’t very nice of him to do; it not like they had the best blankets, but it was rude to just leave it on the floor…

“Are you even listened to me?” He asked exasperatedly.

They looked him over and waved noncommittally, “uh yeah. Sorry, I just thought ya knew; sometimes we just forget we die and need a little reminder… but I guess ‘m not being fair to ya, ain’t I? You’re a Lost Soul, after all, should’ve known better.”

He looked at them confused, “*‘Lost Soul’?* Can you elaborate on that?”

The ghost shrugged, “it's exactly what it says on the tin, buckaroo; A soul that got lost on its way, specifically to the Realms and Beyond. *Most of the time* it's because their core never formed right, or got all messed up like yours.” they pointed at his chest before turning back and placing the blanket back in its chest.

“And a core is…?” they could hear him say.

“‘S like a… heart? Mind n’ body all in one spiffy crystal ball. Pretty convenient if ya ask me, yours was all sparkly and shiny– it was beautiful! I’ve never seen one like it before… ‘Took a while before I was able to fix enough of to keep it semi-stable.” they waited before adding, “try not to fly or do anything too ghoulish for a bit? That should help.”

At their response, the two remained in an uncomfortable silence, a silence neither of them seemed to want to break. They had no idea what the other was thinking, but best to give him time to process.

‘Ah… probably should give ‘em a name to work with…’ they realized.

The ghost walked closer to his hamaca and introduced themselves, “the name’s Riviera, by the way, mind if I could get ‘yers?”

He looked up at them questioningly, “‘Riviera’? Isn't that like, a last name?”

Riviera huffed, amused at his avoiding their question. He probably didn’t mean anything by it; if he couldn’t remember his death, he likely wouldn’t remember other things too. Like his manners, it seemed.

Still, they lolled their head as they told him, “nah, at least– I don’t think it was? I don’t remember my original name. Riviera’s always felt right, though; it's the one I know I must’ve picked before, and it goes with the whole boat theme, don’tcha think?” they rotated their wrist in a circular motion and pointed all around them both.

“WE'RE ON A BOAT??”

Riviera blinked, then laughed, “hehe! Yup! *The S.S Stardust!* ‘Mm surprised you didn’t notice. Didn’t the tackle ‘n poles give it away? I know the waves aren’t as wild as normal, but can’t you feel it rock the room?”

The smaller ghost huffed, “of course not! I have an awful headache AND I’m on a hammock!”

Their laughs tittered off-mentally writing down to make him some tea later for his headache-and conceded, “okay, okay, whatever you say, buckaroo.”

He frowned, “is ‘buckaroo’ really, the best you could come up with? What are you, a cowboy?”

Riviera rolled their eyes and stretched before sitting down on a nearby barrel and using it as a makeshift stool. They looked him in the eye and asked, “well it's not like ya gave me a name when I asked, so buckaroo it is! Besides, it's a fun word!”

The ghost shuffled in his hammock and grumbled to himself, too quiet for them to hear.

“What was that?”

“I said…” he looked away from them, “I said… I don’t remember what my name is, either.”

Riviera stared at him for a minute before accepting his answer, “that’s okay. Don’t worry about it; it’ll come back to ya. I’ve… been down ‘ere a *looooong* time, buckaroo, and even though I don’t see a lotta folks, I do know that it takes a hot minute for Lost Souls to remember stuff. Gotta fix up yer core, and it’ll come right back, promise!” They hummed as they thought up an idea, “why don’t we give ya a temporary name till ya get yers back?”

The patiently waited for his response, after all, names were important things. Especially to ghosts; almost as essential as a Core, with how personalized and reflective it was of someone’s identity.

Finally, he said, “okay, sure, what do you have for me?”

They paused. He wanted their opinion? For a name?

“Why ask me if ya didn’t like buckaroo? You should try commin’ up with one yerself!” Riviera insisted.

The other ghost shook his head, “I already tried earlier when I was trying to remember my own name, but nothing came to mind. I do have this ‘DP’ on my chest though, maybe we could do something with that?”

Riviera agreed, “yeah, I think we can work with that! But there aren’t many names with both letters in ‘em that I can think of, though… unless you wanna be called Dolphin, hahaha.”

He cringed, “yeah, no.”

Things seemed to smooth over between the two of them as they swapped name ideas over a shoddy but hot cup of tea Riviera brewed up on their small stove behind the dividing curtain. Names from Dixie, Dexter, Dennis to Dally, Donnie, and Dickie. Or Percy, Perry, Patrick and Phinny – *short for ‘Pindol’ which was just dolphin backwards*– none of them really sat all that well with him.

Riviera brightened and looked up from their list of names they had written down at this point, “Oh! What about ‘Dan’? That’s short n’ sweet?”

A look of disgust instantly overtook his face, “Nope! Definitely not feeling that one, sorry…”

They shrugged, “eh, okay.” they went down on their list and caught on one they initially dismissed.

Hesitantly, they caught his attention again, “how about this one?”

He leaned closer to them to read their paper, “‘Daphne’? Isn’t that a girl’s name?” he asked.

Riviera clicked their tongue, “I mean, sure, if ya wanna be a prude about it. But it’s got both letters, and I think it fits ya perfectly! And It's pretty, just like yer core. Besides,” they sheepishly looked away, “who cares if it's a boy or girl's name? Name’s can be as serious and silly as ya want, so long as it feels good to *you*, then that’s all that should matter, right? At least, that's what I though when I picked out my name…”

They didn’t want to see his face at their admission. As freeing as being a ghost was, and all the types of ghouls, souls, and people you saw– it still didn’t liberate you from the scrutiny of other, closed-minded individuals. Alive *or* dead. And while they didn’t think he was anything like that from first impressions, it was still much too early to tell much of anything.

“I’ve never really thought about it like that, *you’re right,* Riviera.” the corners lips slowly quirked up, “Daphne’s *perfect*. For now, I mean!”

“…and thank you, for saying that.” he quietly added.

‘and for helping me too,’ went unsaid, but understood.

Riviera beamed at his thanks. Their Obsession and Core pulsed with satisfaction and joy– producing a gentle wave of healing invisible ectoplasm to wash over them both briefly. They were glad to have help him; that’s all they wanted, *honest.*

Always do a good deed if you can, right?

“Of course! Always happy to help.”

4. It's All Water Under The Bridge

Summary for the Chapter:

> “Riviera, I’m only gonna keep asking about it till you answer me.”
>
> With a huff, the ghost pulled the bowl away. Letting him wait impatiently for them to answer.
>
> Until, “maybe I’ll tell ya if ya finish the bowl.”
>
> “Maybe??”
>
> He could see the outline of their slightly creepy grin, “yeah. Maybe.” they said rather defiantly.
>
> The two stared at each other, like a bad game of ‘try not to blink first,’ for way too long. Both of them too stubborn to look away first. It didn’t help that neither of them really needed to blink.
>
> Electric green warred with drowned blue.
>
> Only for his old reflexes to kick in and make him blink when Riviera mischievously blew air in his face.
>
> “Augh! No fair, cheater!” he whined.
>
> (In which danny eats some soup, which is a bit ironic when you realize he's the one souping others)

Notes for the Chapter:

> This is rather dialogue heavy, but I love writing conversations so sue me, its my fic.

Riviera sang a lot, Daphne noticed.

After first waking up and settling down on a name, he promptly knocked out soon after, exhausted from… well, *everything.*

His pain, his memory loss, his… *death.*

Riviera found him once, blank face and staring into the nothingness of the dark ceiling above.

It's like they could tell immediately what he was thinking about, and told him, "Hey, Ghoulie? Try not to think about *it* too hard, *that's dangerous."*

Then he'd doze on and off again, not being able to stay as lucid as before. Often to Riviera singing softly behind the curtains that divided the hammocks and desk from the rest of the small boat. A soft orange glow frequently lit behind their big, distinct silhouette. Somehow, he imagines that they're a lot smaller under the giant raincoat.

He'd hear them sing bits and pieces of *Oh My Darling, Clementine*. A song he's never heard the full version of until now; unless Riviera was just a creepy lyricist.

"Drove the horses to the water,

Every morning just at nine,

Hit her foot against a splinter,

Fell into the foaming brine–

— Ruby lips above the water,

Blowing bubbles soft and fine,

But alas, I was no swimmer,

So I lost my Clementine."

And then he falls back asleep, never really hearing the beginning or end of any song. Like a creepy loop. But it wasn't all bad. Riviera themself was much a much quieter and calming presence, than their first chaotic conversation. Whether that was because they were trying to let him rest and recover, or their first meeting was an outlier in their personality, he didn't know.

Even if they sang creepy old songs, a soft energy would often wash over him, lulling him into a peaceful and empty sleep.

'Like a lullaby', he realized one time while he was struggling to stay awake, again by their soft singing in their kitchenette behind the raggedy blue curtain. They were likely preparing him some more of that fish soup broth, at least, he assumed it was fish soup.

As to why he'd still need sleep, water, and food If he was dead? He didn't know yet; it seemed like a huge contradiction in his opinion.

Faintly, he could hear them sing,

"How I missed her! How I missed her,

How I missed my Clementine,

But I kissed her little sister,

I forgot my Clementine–

—Oh my darling, oh my darling,

Oh my darling, Clementine,

You are lost and gone forever,

Dreadful sorry, Clementine."

Daphne watched as Riviera emerged from behind the curtain with the bowl of soup he predicted in one hand and a bucket full of water in the other, seemingly unbothered by the imbalance and heat. He often wondered how thick their rubbery gloves were, and how they managed to use their hands without problem. His own gloves, while flexible, still had a lot more resistance and limited range of movement in comparison to their much chunkier looking ones. Curiously, when he started feeling better, the other ghost scolded him when he tried to take any part of his suit off; warning him that doing so was just a *'bad idea'* with no further explanation.

Riviera approached him silently, having done this enough times to not warrant an explanation. Dutifully setting down the bucket and ladle of drinking water besides him and help prop him up with their own pillow for him to borrow.

He remembered when he glanced at their own hammock once, and notice they didn't have one of their own. He asked and insisted they take it back when he realized they gave him the only one, but the laughed and reassured him that it was fine–

"Are you absolutely sure? I mean, you already gave me your blanket. I'd feel bad if I took your only pillow too! You've already helped me so much." he said, with a guilt-ridden voice.

The ghost smiled, "yeah, buckaroo, it's okay! Blanket s'not mine anyways, it's Abuelo's. An' I know fer a fact he won't 'ave a problem wit' it while he's away. Also, yer the one that's all messed up in the first place– it's my job to look after ya while yer staying in MY boat, ghoulie–"

"— You doin' okay there, Daphne? Hello?"

A white gloved waved in his line of sight, breaking him from his thoughts and giving him déjà vu.

Sheepishly, he shook his head, "sorry, I was zoning out again. More fish broth?" he grimaced.

Riviera stared at him briefly before nodding and bringing the steaming bowl to his face, “yup! Don’t exactly have much else ‘round ‘here… Think ya can eat on yer own if I hold the bowl?”

He nodded; his strength was better, but he found he had a hard time holding hot objects. He freaked out after touching the bowl when their back was turned that his hand was starting to melt under his glove, dripping with blueish green liquid. Riviera was quick to take it away after that; but the heat only effected his hands– eating hot food and drink were completely fine.

They hold the wooden bowl close for him as he began to eat with a matching wooden spoon. Small pieces of fish and… seaweed? Some kind of aquatic plant, he guessed. It was weird to think about, how could a dead person eat a dead fish? How did any of this make sense?

“Yer thinking too hard again, buckaroo, I can tell.” said Riviera.

Daphne put the spoon down to respond, “It's just, you never answered me. Before, I mean. About the fact that I can still feel things, like getting hungry and thirsty, even though I’m… *dead?* That just doesn’t make sense! Or where this soup came from, either.”

At his question, the strange ghost snorted like it was a dumb question and waved him off, which immensely irked him, but he *insisted.*

“Riviera, I’m only gonna keep asking about it till you answer me.”

With a huff, the ghost pulled the bowl away. Letting him wait impatiently for them to answer.

Until, “maybe I’ll tell ya if ya finish the bowl.”

“Maybe??”

He could see the outline of their slightly creepy grin, “yeah. *Maybe*.” they said rather defiantly.

The two stared at each other, like a bad game of ‘try not to blink first,’ for way too long. Both of them too stubborn to look away first. It didn’t help that neither of them really needed to blink.

Electrified green warred with drowned blue.

Only for Daphne's old reflexes to kick in and make him blink when Riviera mischievously blew air in his face.

"Augh! No fair, cheater!" he whined.

Riviera smirked, "eat up, buckaroo!"

He groaned as they practically shoved the bowl in his face again. Following through and finishing what was left quickly to, *hopefully*, get some answers out of the mysterious ghost.

As he set the spoon down, and they placed it on the old desk to take away later, he impatiently asked, "Well?"

Riviera had an amused look of satisfaction on their face. A familiar but extremely rare wash of calm and relief going over him. The sharp ache across his skin temporarily soothed, like a cool, brisk shower on sunburnt skin. It was gone just as quickly as he noticed it, but he could recognize it better now from when it first happened before.

He didn't know what triggered it or why it only rarely happened, just that it came from *them*,

Riviera.

The same kind but eerie Riviera in front of him now, whom the only thing he could see being the outline of a face and bright, ghastly blue eyes from under their pitch black hood. The ghost that held the answers to all his questions, or at least *some* of them.

They let out a long-drawn-out, and preformative sigh, "ya really don't know when to quit, do ya, Daphne?" they clicked their tongue, "okay, fine. I'll explain some things but not everythin' since it's not exactly somethin' most ghoulies like us like to talk about, aight?"

He nodded, just as the grumbled, "*an' it ain't like I know everythin' either.* " under their breath.

Riviera moved to lean on the wall closest to him, a look of discomfort on their face as they began;

“First off, yer a *Lost Soul,* remember, no good core? Heart, Mind, and Body?” he nodded, “well, without one of those, things start to get all wrong for ghosties and ghoulies. It carries on all our old memories n’ the thing that makes us up. That includes *habits*.”

They took a breath, as an unconscious example before they realized and winced, “kinda like I just did there– Lotta newer ghosts tend to just *act* alive ‘cause it's like a reflex or muscle memory. I mean, a lotta those habits were how livin’ folk emote in the first place. It's a literal lifetime of a built-in thing, it only wears off the longer you’ve been dead as ya start not to do it anymore since you just… forget to do it.”

The hummed, “kinda like missin' taking yer medicine– or bein’ so busy ya keep pushin’ it off fer so long ya stop because ya forgot it.”

He took in their words, “huh… does that mean, I died recently? Since I still need to do those things?” the thought made him squeamish.

Riviera shook their head no, “mm-mm, nah. The rules ain’t the same for a Soul like you; yer soul got taken during the month of the Reaping. That’s when The Reaper goes out before the Reaper’s Moon rises, so all the Lost Souls he collects ‘n brings back get a second chance at fixin’ their cores before the Sea swallows ‘em up. The Souls he finds can be hella old, or freshly dead– so there’s no tellin’ when ya died before ya got broken n’ stuck like ya are, since Lost Souls stay stagnant in the livin’ world.”

He frowned, “so there really isn’t anything to tell me where I came from or how I died…”

Riviera sympathized with his sadness, “sorry, buckaroo… but not all is lost– yer soul just needs to heal up before the Reaping finished, once the moon rises and yer soul is all healed up, then ya can regain yer ghostliness. *And yer memories!* Ah, the important ones, anyway.”

He cautiously looked up at them, “Really? How can we fix it?”

They reached a hand under their hood and scratched something while they thought, although he couldn’t tell with how a consistent darkness covered up whenever something past its threshold, “well…

usually The Ferryman would be the one to help ya, but for whatever reason, it was Abuelo who found ya instead. Typically, he only picks up stragglers The Ferryman forgot or missed. We usually keep 'em here till the next ferry comes back since the Sea's too dangerous for us to pass through instead of the other rivers."

He briefly wondered in the back of his mind exactly *how much* and *why* Riviera seemingly knew all this, but pushed it aside.

Daphne's face scrunched up as he asked, "o-kayyy, so this boat guy missed me, when does he come back to fix this? Also, you keep repeating about this 'Sea' is that like, metaphorical or real?"

Riviera snorted, "a little bit of both, actually, *kinda.* The 'Sea' is actually just a big ol' river that goes through the Living and the Dying Realms, as Abuelo puts it. He's the Fisher King, so he gets to help around 'ere 'cause he's all strong n' stuff. Other rivers like the Nile, Tigris, Amazon, n' a bunch more cross into it to deliver their dead or other Realms. An' that's not even counting the rivers of the underworld like the Greek ones."

The ghost stretched, and look down at the bucket of water still at their feet. Taking a small break to help Daphne drink. They even took a drink themselves after Daphne encouraged them too.

When they handed the ladle back to him, he sarcastically said, "at least we don't have to worry about sharing germs now."

Riviera giggled, "hahaha, guess not!"

Shortly after putting everything away, they moved to sit in their own hammock besides him to continue their explanation, "ahem, as I was sayin'– right now we're on the Styx, it's the closest to the livin' world, and just a ways away from where mi Abuelo fished ya up from the Sea. I guess ya could call the other rivers streets and the Sea a highway? Mm, that doesn't sound entirely right, but Abuelo's better at explaining how it works than me."

They pulled out a crumpled paper ball from their coat pocket, "He went back to look out fer more Lost Souls, but since The Ferryman hasn't been seen in a while, he told me to help ferry ya instead!"

Daphne's eyes widened, "You? Why? And why just me? I thought you just say you guys stay outta the Sea?"

At his shock, Riviera just winked at him as they opened the crumpled letter to reveal a big gold coin, "see this? I found it in yer throat when I was fixin' ya up. Looks like whoever must've buried ya wished ya to have a safe an' happy journey! So, you already paid yer toll! It's only right we help you right away, even if the Ferryman can't! It's improper– 'sides the Sea might be dangerous, but s'not like I've never navigated it before! Got plenty o' experience from bein' 'ere so long."

Riviera brightened and blushed as they added, "an' if I can help ya, why wouldn't I? You seem alright, Daph!"

His heart, *'core'*, he reminded himself, warmed at their sincerity. Gratefully taking the gold coin in mild disgust and wonder as they handed it to them, thankfully clean.

It had a bright sheen to it, and a hefty weight to it. It was far from being perfectly round and flat, more like a smooth small rock, with an engraving of a lion fighting a bull on the top.

He could hear the other gush over the coin as he rotated it to get a better look, "I know yer worried about how ya died and yer living life, but this coin–it ain't some regular old dabloon! It's a *Lydian Lion!* Possibly one of the oldest and rarest coins ever, and! *It's golden."* their voice became soft with hopeful energy, "whoever gave ya that must've really cared about ya… to go through all the trouble n' money to find one an' be willing to bury it with ya to make sure The Ferryman kept ya safe? They coulda just used an obol, or even a penny. The Ferryman doesn't discriminate."

He raised a brow at their statement, "How'd you know that?"

Riviera replied proudly, "'cause if he's anything like me, *the coolest fisher-ghoul there ever was on the Sea*, he'd have good taste and like anything shiny!"

Now it was his time to chuckle at their overdramatic reaction to some crummy old coin.

“Hey! You won’t be laughing when I show you how cool some of the wishing coins the living throw down here all willy-nilly! They’re so neat! Almost as cool as the fish.” they huffed.

He only laughed louder, “heh, I-I’m sorry, but you sound like such an *old man* right now! Hahaha!”

Riviera despaired as he proceeded to lightheartedly make fun of all the colourful tackle and fishing poles mounted on the wall behind them.

Though, if anything, it was all for show. Although they still had their assumptions and worries about the other, both ghosts just were happy to have made the other laugh.

5. On Troubled Waters

Summary for the Chapter:

> Going inside means leaving the comforting warm red behind for the cold brown interior of the shanty. Stuck with their blue raincoat and white gloves.
>
> And Daphne's black and white suit rubber suit.
>
> Riviera smiles, although the emotion behind doing so is indecipherable, "he has snow-white hair and glowing green eyes." they lilt to no one but themselves.
>
> They thank everything that his eyes are an energetic green, and not bleak blue like his Core originally suggested.
>
> Like their own eyes.
>
> (Red, Green, And Blue, Riviera has an unbalanced colour value.)

Notes for the Chapter:

> Warning for descriptions of unreality/slight mentions depersonalization, choking, drowning, and a panic attack. This is a darker than usual chapter.

Riviera stood silently at the boat's front deck, overlooking the Styx's bloody waters as the *S.S. Stardust* loyally, but lazily, floated down the river. Here, there was no question about the Sea of Soul's supernatural nature. Where the red waters weren't wine; but the blood of every slain man and beast that had ever soaked into the earth. The Styx was underground; you could see the cavernous sky above. In shades of black and gray and copper, and *iron.*

Their nose was long since used to the rusty, rotting smell down here.

Smell was just one of those living habits that tend to stay with you the longest; sight and hearing? Shorter. Touch and taste?

Immediate.

How curious was it, that Riviera had never remembered any of this till now; so engrossed and hyper aware of their body in a way they hadn't before. Everything was just so much, overstimulating to the max. Every texture, taste, sight, and sound where there once was nothing but constant, utter deafness and dark. No consciousness or self to even *be* aware of.

Riviera didn't exist before.

And yet they did *now.*

Why?

Before this, they would equate themselves to a *Turritopsis dohrnii* jellyfish. Immortal, alive, existent, *but mindless.* Just an ectoplasmic body that floated endlessly through time with no name, and no history. Let alone a self to give name and family to.

They had *some* memories. Memories that only spontaneously existed when they started to; when Daphne appeared in the hamaca next to them, his Core damaged almost beyond repair. It was like *instinct,* to care for him without question. Taking action shortly after reading the letter on the desk left behind by an 'abuelo' they couldn't help but acknowledge as fact.

Then, as time passed, memories began to flood in. Memories of the Sea, its purpose, what it was, what *they* are, of spending countless ages just navigating the endless rivers. They had regained their self;

'My name is Riviera, I know that because my Abuelo calls me that in the letters he leaves behind for me, and it feels like ***mine.*** *Like I chose it before I died, Like I told him to write. I am dead, but I don't know for how long. Otherwise, I would not be here, and know all that I do of ghost and souls and ghouls– I have been on the Sea of Souls for as long as I can remember. I remember other letters; of meeting a Davy Jones, and Seal Women. Of fishing in these waters, and cruising through the Nile and*

Tigris before. But these memories are so far away, so unbelievable, unfeasible, that they are like dreams to me.'

In the past, while the nameless boy who would be called Daphne slept, Riviera often had the same Taoist parable come to mind, as their memory swears their beloved Abuelo must've told them once before. As their beloved boat drifts peacefully, they would repeat to themselves,

"Once upon a time, I, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering and flying, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Riviera. Soon I awakened, and there I was, veritably myself again–

— Now I do not know whether I was then a ghost dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a ghost. Between a ghost and a butterfly, there is a distinction."

"The transition is called the transformation of material things." the finish now, in the present.

The true parable was written by a living man at the time; Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi. And he was originally writing about himself, and Riviera assumed the meaning to be about dreams and reality. But for them; the parable was relatable to their own situation. If they were real or not, before this moment. If the memories they are regaining now really theirs or the ghost who originally experienced them.

*"**I've… been down 'ere a looooong time,** buckaroo, and even though I don't see a lotta folks, I do know that it takes a hot minute for Lost Souls to remember stuff."*

*"Who cares if it's a boy or girl's name? Name's can be as serious and silly as ya want, so long as it feels good to you, then that's all that should matter, right? **At least, that's what I though when I picked out my name…** "*

*"Oh God, there was so much blood and you were so outta it! You're lucky mi abuelito found ya! I mean, all the way out 'ere? **No one ever comes out here!"***

“—I think you might be the first person I've seen in days! Or has it already been a few weeks? Months? Can't be that long, right? Ah man, ***I'm terrible with time…*** *”*

“Oh my God! Wait! ***Didn't I see the Seal Woman three weeks ago?*** *And Davy Jones had to’ve been, like,* ***at max a year ago?*** *I coulda sworn–!”*

“ Ah, sorry, bad habit–tend to speak to myself a lot… not often I see other folk, y’know.”

Every word they’ve spoken so far feels like a lie, and it's like they were just waiting for Daphne to wake up for them to start blabbing. How could they possibly know anything about they say about themselves, *say any of that,* if they’d never even used their name before they had even said it? They were practically just as compelled to tell all this to him as they were about taking care of his body while on death’s second door. Err, death’s pool?

Before Daphne, The ghost that was Riviera *now,* did not exist. Not *really*.

“So who really am I?” they asked the river, in complete silence.

Their voice repeats in their head in the same way they responded to Daphne’s own similar questions,

“Hey, Ghoulie? Try not to think about it too hard, ***that’s dangerous.*** *”*

Riviera dreads, knowing they can’t stay out here forever, on the small deck on calm metallic waters. The colour red is not supposed to be a calming colour, but it is to them. It's the colour blue that sets them off, the same dye of their clothes and the water in the Living Realm. Going inside means leaving the comforting warm red behind for the cold brown interior of the shanty. Stuck with their blue raincoat and white gloves.

And Daphne’s black and white rubber suit.

Riviera smiles, although the emotion behind doing so is indecipherable, “he has snow-white hair and glowing green eyes.” they lilt to no one but themselves.

They thank everything that his eyes are an energetic green, and not bleak blue like his Core originally suggested.

Like their own haunting eyes.

It was so horribly nauseating to treat his wounds with that awful, yet morbidly beautiful, frostbitten blue sheen coating his entire body, but Riviera persisted. Even with his injuries and oozing corruption dripping off his melting limbs.

They hated how restless and fearful they feel while he recovers. It took everything in Riviera's system not to hover by his side. Watching him like some worried sick mother hen, and resisting hightailing it and dump him back into the River to fend for himself. Constantly fighting between their Obsession, scathing with rage and frustration at their inability to *fix* him immediately. Or their Core's screams to stay far away from him–for fear of getting corrupted themselves. After all, a broken core didn't just affect the person themselves, but permeated bad ectoplasm around them.

Because Daphne was dying a second time at that moment. His Core was failing; and even with paying his toll, keeping him preserved long enough to be fished out in time. If Riviera hadn’t acted as fast as they had, the Sea would have taken him away instantly, to be amassed into like all the other Lost Souls the Ferryman didn’t save in time.

It's why no one stayed in the Sea, it was just too dangerous, *too toxic*, with all the broken cores and corrupted souls that made up the Sea's waters.

Rivera suppressed one last sigh. A habit they had yet to drop, concerning their breath. Always, it seemed as if they could still feel their lungs with every in and exhale and no other organs. Their lungs, which are water logged, and oh so uncomfortable. Not even a

heartbeat; which they theorize must've been one of their first living instincts to have dropped upon death, unlike most like Daphne. His Core still pulsed like a heart, but it was unnaturally fast, as if it was about to enter cardiac arrest at any moment.

They had their suspicions surrounding his death after just one look at his body. With plenty of scar tissue creeping up his palm, arm, and chest underneath the scraps of black fabric. His core, his eyes, his lack of memory, the tremor in his hand, and even the burnt smell he carried were all evidence of his last moments. A ghost's body is like a painting, showing you everything you need to draw your own conclusion. But the facts didn't add up the further you investigated.

His attire and burns all pointed to electrocution, but the coin in his mouth, roughed up appearance and injuries–

And most damning, his *Core.*

If he had died from electrocution, how did he come to have so many other injuries? Like his broken rib cage, the multiple puncture wounds and deep cuts, and all his head trauma? Of course, maybe his body had simply been desecrated post death for whatever reason. But that wouldn't appear if he was already dead, since most western ghosts leave any attachments to their bodies behind upon death. Potentially, his broken Core's effect on his ghost body's material state was at fault. Broken chest because he had turned to ice and the rough journey from the Living Realm was just that damaging.

… There was, of course, one other possible reason they didn't like to think about, however,

Murder.

And a horribly gruesome one at that.

Riviera held back a whimper as their head ached at the mere idea, and their throat clogged, and their *chest–*

I–I can't breathe! Let me OUT! I can't swim up– I can't BREATHE–

Their entire body shuddered, letting out a wet gasp. Bloody water violently tried to spew out of their mouth and nose as they coughed

and hacked– desperately slapping a hand over the lower half of their face in a futile attempt to keep it down. It felt as if a slippery hand was choking them from the inside and restricting an airflow they didn't even need but felt so *real*–

Their mind grew foggier and foggier with each passing second, so lightheaded.

They cursed having these memories monstrously claw their way out of their rolling stomach, and every new sensation on their dead, ghastly shell. This new hyper aware hell. Their own personal Loch Ness monster permanently lodged in their throat, free to swim up and down their body like a fucked up specter's parasite. Free to gluttonously feed on their fears and prevent their own postmortem peace…

'There's truly no rest for us wicked,' they bitterly reminded themselves.

Distantly, they could hear Daphne's muffled voice behind the shanty door. He was calling out for them, likely having just woken up from his latest resting period. It wouldn't be too long, hopefully, before he could move again, and they could set a course for the other rivers to start his journey.

Thinking of his recovery was just what their Obsession need to break them out of this shitty memory and grip onto a metaphorical life raft. They grinded their teeth as they swallowed back their inner Styx, raggedly breathing in and out carefully. Slowly but surely, the panic escaped from their body as Riviera focused on the *bright green* flooding their imagination, green meant good things.

Riviera strangles out a sputtering, croaking speech out of their sore chest,

"I-I can-cannot dr-rown, for I s-see green, gr-r-reen which is gra-a-ass, a-and grass which is ground, and ground for w-which I cannot drown up and down, I cannot drown, for I see green, green which is grass, and grass which is ground, and ground for which I cannot drown up and down, I cannot drown, *for I see green, green which is grass, and grass which is ground, and ground for which I cannot drown up and down–"*

Over and *over,* their mantra saving grace.

Their breathing slows down, and the sharp pains in their water clogged lungs lessens into small stings with every intake of coppery air. And soon they stop breathing in a way that matters anymore.

'Time to go inside, getting Daphne across the sea is all that matters, not his death. The sooner he's gone, the sooner this ends.'

6. Salting Freshwater

Summary for the Chapter:

> Maybe if it was a moon rock, he'd understand. But it might as well have been worth the same as boring old coal– it was all carbon anyways– seeing as ghosts likely didn't even need money because what was he going to buy with it? Food? Water? A home? I'M DEA–
>
> Daphne growled as he clutched his temple, “STOP! Just, stop–! Don't think about it too hard!” He hissed. Desperate to think about anything else right now. A better thing to worry about.
>
> (Daphne’s perfect. I’ve never really thought about it like that, you’re right, Riviera.)
>
> (…and thank you, for saying that.)
>
> (Of course! Anything to make it easier on ya.)
>
> Just, why? Why anything? Where was the motive?! Ghosts! People! Whoever, don't just selflessly want to help Danny–
>
> Danny.
>
> His eyes widened in disbelief,
>
> “My name is Danny!” He gasped.

The time had come for Daphne to *finally* break free of the headache-inducing swinging nightmare that was the damn hammock he was bound to for what seemed like *forever*.

He was quite literally vibrating in place with sheer joy as he waited for Riviera's official ‘go ahead’ verdict when they returned from the

deck outside. The only thing keeping him in the netted rat's nest was risking the other ghost's disappointment at him. For some reason, he got this pit in his stomach and felt terrible whenever he let them down. Whether it be from not finishing his soup, or trying to convince them to take a break instead of watching over him when it got real bad; he felt so *guilty*. Especially considering taking care of him wasn't something they *had* to do. Not if the person actually responsible for his situation was around.

Silently, he begrudges the Ferryman for not doing his job right and making Riviera do his dangerous job for him. If he knew how, he'd even do it himself.

That aside,

'Now that I'm better, I can pay them back for everything. I can make things easier on them!' He smiled to himself, eager to get on his feet and do something, *anything,* to help Riviera as thanks. It only felt right!

… Now if only he figured out *what.*

He looked around the boat from his rest to get an idea of what to start with, but most of the tiny space was obscured by the blue curtain dividing it in half. Same old fishing rods, tackle, buckets, and barrels. He knew from eating the same bowl of soup every… day?

Yeah, day, let's go with that. Maybe his internal clock wasn't lost yet.

Anyways, he knew from eating and brief moments awake that Riviera cooked. So that had to mean they had some kind of kitchenette, or something adjacent. Or that they had a way of cleaning their bowls, at the very least. Maybe he could cook his own meals?

'Do I still remember to cook? Did I ever cook when I was alive?' he asked himself. Though, his thought process turned sour at the tail end of that.

He could feel himself grimace, *'don't think about it, don't think about it, just think about helping.'*

Okay! *Helping!*

He nervously whistled and twisted with his seemingly permanent frostbitten, purple fingers. So cooking is a maybe, what about cleaning?

He looks over the buckets, thinking if he's ever seen Riviera ‘sweep the deck’ so to speak.

At that, he can't help but chuckle at his own bad joke.

But still, *no,* he's never noticed Riviera clean much of anything other than dusting their desk. Which was odd, because how did a ghost ship get dusty?

‘Losing track here!’ he grumbled, still looking and landing his eyes on a bright green fishing pole.

‘Oh!’

He brightened. Perhaps he could help them fish, if they'd agree to teach him? That way, they could focus on getting them across the Sea, without having to worry about getting food on the table too.

Daphne nodded, satisfied with the idea, “yeah… that'll do; teach a man to fish, and he'll be full forever, right?”

A few more minutes pass, and he's watching the door with bated breath for Riviera to come back in, with loud singing, creepy but happy blue eyes and all, but it doesn't happen.

His grin slowly falls off his face as confusion replaces it. They've never left him *alone* for this long before; at least not when he was awake. He can't be entirely sure what Riviera does when he's asleep.

The back of his neck gets prickly, and his hair does that static-y thing it does when he gets upset, *upset*. Because he can't help but acknowledge that one little dark, obtrusive thought he's had since meeting the other ghost,

‘What are they doing? Why are they so secretive? What if they're actually tricking me and- and they're going to hurt me–’ he mentally panics.

He absolutely *hates,* how paranoid he can get. Even over the tiniest

thing. Riviera will feed them some soup as normal, and he'll get the nagging fear that they might've poisoned it. Refusing to eat at all and coming up with any excuse to not eat it. The first time he did it, they hadn't asked about it. The four other times, they had gotten skeptical and pushed.

It hadn't ended well.

But Riviera didn't do it again after they learned; just giving him a quiet “okay,” taking a sip themselves to show it was clean, and leaving it for him to get to on his own time. Once it was cooled, obviously, and picking out whatever it was that bugged him or testing it with his own pinky.

Then there was the time Riviera got close to him with their big wooden oar. He was barely conscious, and all he could see was a tall dark figure, with stormy eyes and a big weapon getting closer to him.

He had jolted, and flinched away from them. His fight reflexes had kicked in, and he slapped their outreaching hand away from him. He was just trying to protect himself.

And they looked so *sad.* When he did that.

They didn't say anything, just backed away and kept their distance. Letting him calm down on his own time, but humming a comforting song to beckon him back. When he realized what he did, he apologized. Of all things; Riviera didn't deserve to be hit like that. No matter how freaked out he had been.

But they just shook their head, telling Daphne,

“It's fine, buckaroo, ya ain't the first person to hit me, an' won't be the last. 'Sides, most ghoulies like us ain't exactly friendlies wit' one anotha most of the time. It's a good reflex to have on the Sea.”

Their response hadn't sat right with him then, and it still didn't now. But he was grateful they had just let it go. Not even angry with him.

‘Why, why don’t they get mad at me?’ he found himself asking.

It was an unanswered question. It was… *unexpected.* How gentle, and understanding, Riviera was. A far cry as to what they initially came off as; loud and brash with no filter. They just *didn't* fight him over every single little thing, even things they clearly didn't want to talk about. It did make him a bit guilty to demand they answer his questions about Souls and whatnot after the fact, however.

He always felt his chest tighten when those kinda of events happened, expecting them to finally throw in the towel and throw *him* out. After all, why go through all this trouble? Why for him?

Riviera winked at him, revealing a lumpy gold coin in crumpled paper, "see this? I found it in yer throat when I was fixin' ya up. Looks like whoever must've buried ya wished ya to have a safe an' happy journey! So, you've paid yer toll! It's only right we help you right away, even if the Ferryman can't! It's improper– 'sides the Sea might be dangerous, but s'not like I've never navigated it before! Got plenty o' experience from bein' 'ere so long."

Was Riviera really all that much of a stickler about being proper? They were very contradictory when they wanted to be; ghosts being apparently hostile, and yet they went through all this trouble? Especially if the trip was as dangerous as they said it was, he had a hard time thinking there wasn't any other reason for them to do so. A hidden ploy, like they were lying behind their teeth and hiding a knife behind their back as they nursed him back to health.

Or was it really just because he 'paid his toll' all for some stupid fancy-shmancy lump of gold? Maybe if it was a moon rock, he'd understand. But it might as well have been worth the same as boring old coal– it was all carbon anyways– seeing as ghosts likely didn't even *need* money because what was he going to buy with it? *Food? Water? A home? I'M DEA–*

Daphne growled as he clutched his temple, "*STOP! Just, stop–!* Don't think about it too hard!" He hissed. Desperate to think about anything else right now. A better thing to worry about.

"Daphne's perfect. I've never really thought about it like that, you're right, Riviera."

"…and thank you, for saying that."

"Of course! ***Anything to make it easier on ya. "***

Just, why? Why anything? Where was the motive?! Ghosts! People! Whoever, don't just selflessly want to help ***Danny–***

Danny.

Danny.

His eyes widened in disbelief,

"My name was is! Danny!" He gasped.

Suddenly, he can't wait to tell Riviera.

When Riviera struts back inside with the bright outline of their smile. Their was gaze cast down at their feet and thankfully away from his own, but they still possessed an air of positive energy wrapped around them,

Daphne *Danny* can't help but feel anxious, instead of the excitement he expected. But it's buried deep down and blamed on nerves. Regaining a memory like this so soon and important was bound to make him jittery.

He greets and waves at them, "Riviera! You're back, great, I just remembered something!"

The other ghost's head turns sharply up at him, and he can almost see their full face for a moment. Still too shadowed to see skin tone, but he can see the mirage of furrowed brows, a frown tugging on the corner of their lips, and wet hair peeking out of their hood.

'Was it raining out there?' he wondered.

But it was gone all too soon, back under the permanent darkness the one light in the room could never break through.

Riviera sounded happy, “ya did? Good on ya, buckaroo, go on then, yell me!”

Daphne? Danny eagerly nodded and got up on his elbows to sit up, even pulling his pillow to the front to hug close to his chest. Riviera, already sitting by the next him, ready to listen.

“My name is Danny.”

Riviera looked at him up and down, “Danny, huh? Fits. Not that far off from 'Daphne' either… Well then, happy to meet ya again, *Danno!”*

He feels a strong jolt go down his spine, *‘Wait, no, don't call me that.’*

“Thatta boy, Danno! Just like your ol'man taught you!”

“—Danno, *Daniel,* Danny-O? Dilly-Danny? *Hey!* Listen to me–!”

“Come on, Daniel; I expected more of you by now.”

“DAPHNE!”

Danny? Daphne snapped out of his thoughts, “wha… what? Sorry! I didn't! I…” he looked away from Riviera's worried eyes and clutched on tighter to the pillow, “I dunno what happened; but, don't uh… uhm, Danny by itself is enough.” He struggled to find the right words, “It’s what *I* chose. ” He finished quietly.

Riviera clicked their tongue in annoyance, which made him wince. He didn't want to upset them.

Their eyes widened for a second before they hastily tried placating him, “wait! Mm' not mad at ya! Mm' just… I get it. I *get* it.”

I get it.

But did he?

And then he whispered, “… but Daphne’s… *Daphne is* …”

Riviera wordless understands what he was trying to say, even if he entirely doesn’t even know himself, and changes the topic. Sparing him of having to say it himself. It's just another one of those things he feels like he can’t repay them enough for.

7. Styx: Blood in the Water, Part 1

Summary for the Chapter:

> Curious, he nudges Riviera to get their attention and asks, “we're on Styx, right? That's a Greek river, isn't it?”
>
> The ghost nods, “yup. Waited 'ere, 'cause the river's generally calmer than th’others.”
>
> He fidgets under their gaze, choosing to fiddle with his gloves instead of returning their sharp attention. He continues, “so it's only gonna get worse from here on out, jeez… do you know where they all lead?”
>
> Riviera lolls their head as they stretch. They spare him a look, “nope.” They answer plainly.
>
> Danny quirks an eyebrow and finally looks up, “that's all ya got for me? There has to be something. Like, uh, I don't know… Hell?”
>
> “Keep askin' me ‘bout it, an' I might just take ya there.” they say, but he can’t tell from their dry tone if they’re being entirely serious or making fun of him.

Notes for the Chapter:

> I really struggled with this one, and not totally happy with it but whatever, please enjoy!

“Are ya sure ya don't want any help? It's okay to ask,” Riviera asked.

Danny nodded, but didn't even bother looking up from his shaking feet as he leaned against the wall to support himself. He let out a huff as he struggled to stand straight and replied,

“Y-Yeah, just… hang on, give me a sec here…”

Riviera watched skeptically, but shrugged, “alright then, if ya say so. Just not too fast? Remember, ya've got paper skin–”

“— *and glass bones,* I know, Rivi!” He rolled his eyes as he cut them off.

It was unfortunate that he didn't notice how the other ghost froze at the use of a nickname, a blush, and smile he could not see breaking out under their dark hood. But Riviera quickly covered it up before he could see, instead acting their usual nonchalant attitude.

“‘Aight, don't get all huffy on me,” Riviera smirked as an idea popped into their head. They loudly sighed and batted their lashes at him, hand over where their heart would be, and dramatically boasted, “just wanna make sure all my hard work nursin' ya *delicate, wittle, baby deer, body back from the brink!* Day an' night, twenty-four seven, sleepless nights, without rest or food–”

Danny laughed at their theatrics, “okay! I hear you! Now shush, tryin' to concentrate…”

A comfortable silence filled the room, only interrupted by Danny's breathing and boots scuffing on the floor while he orientated himself.

Riviera already helped him off the hammock, and he fell flat on his face, which sucked as he got a bloody nose out of it. But he was determined to be able to walk on his own!

He did feel a bit like a baby deer, but he refused to admit it. His left leg is worse off than his right, and he feels like if he puts any more pressure on it, he'll fall. Anytime he leans on it a bit too much, his muscles get real tense like they're saying, *“don't do it man,”* and are about to snap if he walks funny.

So he sucks in a breath, braces himself and pushes himself off the wall and onto his two feet.

1…2…3… and…!

A big grin breaks out on his face as he turns to Riviera, “look! I did

it!”

His cheers only last a few seconds, because after he says that, he gets too emboldened and takes a wobbly step towards them.

With his *left* leg.

And suddenly his nerves are on fire, and he's flailing as he slips and about to hit the hard floor again–

‘Augh, no!' he mentally cries.

But right as he's about to eat shit again; strong arms and squeaky blue fabric catch him. Riviera gently holds him up by the elbows and fastens their grip on him, lifting him back on his feet.

He yells as he accidentally stumbles and leans in forward, resulting in his face crashing into their shoulder.

His cheek is smushed into their rubbery smooth poncho, and it's very *cold.* Like it was left outside in bad weather. It actually kinda had a nice texture against his skin; so much better than scratchy thin wool blankets or rough rope hammocks. Like a cool ice pack, keeping his inflammation down.

He can feel Riviera shuffling as their own boots clack on wood. He makes an effort to grab onto their other shoulder with his free hand to try to lean on them instead.

“Hehe, whoa there *Bambi*, getting a lil’ comfy, are we? Can't have ya fall like that again.” Riviera quietly chuckles.

Danny’s ears burned in embarrassment. He turned to look up at them to retort and deny, but when he faced them– He could see their *face* .

Alongside their amused eyes and smile, was washed out, cold, brown skin. *Too many shades off to be like hers, like his, but was so hauntingly human.* Muddied wet hair clung to their cheeks. His brain instantly envisioned, and nagged, that it *had* to be red underneath all the mud and sand caking the true color. Comforting, heart-wrenching red hair to go with familial blue eyes. *Or were her eyes brown?* The whites of their eyes looked terribly irritated and bloodshot, with *concerning but*

common, dark bags underneath. But what he alarmingly noticed upon examination was–

The dark bruising and blotches discoloring the skin around their neck and jaw. A whole myriad of gross colors painting them: from blurring purples, blues and greens, to bright aggravated reds, pinks, and yellows outlining angry indented handprints.

He sucked in air past his teeth in and seethed; a dull sting resonates from the fading burns across his own throat and wrists, sympathetically. But seeing their injury hurt so much more than what he felt, it wasn't fair. Riviera has done nothing but take care of him! And it shouldn't even be their job to do so!

No one can hurt her, she's just doing her best because their parents won't, she shouldn't be the one getting hurt when he's the one who got her into this mess–

He wretches himself away, still clinging to their shoulder, but gaped and pointed at them, "Jesus Christ, Riviera! Are you okay?!"

Riviera's eyes widened, almost dropping him and slapping their glove over their hood to bring it down, blocking them from sight.

Their voice was muffled as they spoke, "I-It's fine! Really, Daph! *Just worry 'bout yerself!* Ya coulda fell again!" They tried to deflect, but Danny didn't buy it.

He growled, something in his chest, not his Core, but *something else* was angry at the sight.

"No way! You can't spout off about helping me when you look all beat yourself! Let me help!" He urged, but Riviera didn't budge.

An annoyed sigh came out of them, "no. I told ya, mm' *fine*. *Don't worry about me,* It's not–" they clicked their tongue and grumbled under their breath, "it's not what you think."

"It's fine, Bucky, ya ain't the first person to hit me, an' won't be the last."

"Don't worry about me, you're the one that got the worst of it out there."

“It's my job to look after ya while yer staying in MY boat, ghoulie–”

“I’m your big sister, so it's MY job to take care of you. But I’d appreciate it if you could do me a favor, look out for yourself too.”

Danny glared, “then explain it to me! Did– Did someone hurt *you?* ” He asks the second half worriedly. Half for them and half for himself, if there was danger to actually worry about.

When the other ghost tries to let him go and leave him to use the desk as support to get away from him, he clutches their shoulder tighter, “hey! I'm talkin' to you! C'mon, just let me help!”

Riviera goes tense as they snark in his face, “what are you gonna do anyways? Feed *me* some soup for my bruises? You can't do nothin’! It's not like I have a stomach like you do! It doesn't *work* like that,” they bark out a humorless laugh and yell, “Daphne, imma dead man walkin’, *ya can’t save me anymore!”*

He can't help but flinch away from them.

‘Yes I can!’ he wants to say, *‘I have to try! You’re right here!'*

Riviera skin isn't blue, or gray, or green. It's brown like his, even if at times they smell like petrichor or track wet footsteps, not all that unlike his ozone scent and static hair. And he can't help but focus on how similar they are. They laugh and breath, they smile and joke, and they walk– never float.

They’re just as alive as he is, they need to be.

Riviera's furious eyes blink, and the anger and tension goes away. Exhausting easily replace it. They were quick to regret losing their temper.

“… Look just,” the ghost looked down at their feet in shame, “ya still obviously don't get how everything works down 'ere. Ya can't just… jump to yer own conclusions like that!”

Danny flushed in embarrassment and confusion, “what are you talking about?”

Riviera winced, “this is gonna… not sound right, but, to keep it short; you're yer own ghost– Lost Soul. Meanwhile, I've been dead fer a long time– probably longer than you, so I don't… I don't…” their voice quivered, “I can't eat, I can't drink, not really. Not like you do,”

“I told you; ghosts *pretend* to be alive ‘cause that's all *we* can do, *pretend*. I’ve made peace with my death, why can’t you?”

‘About your death, or mine?’ They both don’t say.

In Riviera's mind, they're frustrated with him; acting as if they could get hurt or had needs he was still compelled to do for himself. Insisting on treating them the same as any other living person. Something Riviera refused to accept, because they weren’t. They can’t be that for him. Not when it took them so long to come to terms with it themselves. They don’t want to remember ever being alive. The living world was full of misery and tight boxes to fit into. If he saw them as any living person, they would have to go back to that awful existence.

'He's too fresh, too lively,' they ruminate in the privacy of their own mind. Wondering just *how* they're going to resolve that issue.

‘Acceptance of death is always the hardest, why couldn't it be unfinished business instead? Or reuniting with another soul? Can’t he see he’s better off dead than alive?!’

But Riviera knows better than to voice their thoughts in front of him. Then to continue screaming because what good what that do? He’s still stuck on their boat anyways. They hate fighting and screaming matches. They’d rather forget this and get it over with, back to their joking around and quiet singing. And when he fulfills his Journey, they could finally give up their existence again and float mindlessly. Back to their own comforting, peaceful afterlife, before they were plagued by all these memories and instincts to restore the world around them.

‘Again, and again, this cycle never ends, just as the world is revolving. I wake up, I remember, I forget, I dream. Did I dream I was alive? Or am I alive, dreaming I am dead?’

Returning to their conversation, Riviera frowns, “I… I just, look, like this. *Always*. I'm not hurtin’ if that's what yer worried 'bout.”

Riviera scowled one last time as they finished, “now, that's all I'm sayin’ 'bout it, though, *don't push yer luck.”*

They left no room to argue.

But Danny understood he might have pushed a little too hard this time and replied to Riviera the same courtesy they've given him since they met.

He let it go and said, “okay.”

The stormy cloud that permeated the room vanishes at his words, Riviera nods, just trying to quickly change the topic and move on again, “thanks. Now, wanna try walkin' again? Yer heavy, my arm is startin' to hurt holdin’ ya up like this.”

Danny startles at the sudden diversion, but offers a weak smile, “right, sorry! And I am *not* that heavy, but, whatever. Maybe you can hold my arm, so I don't fall while I walk?”

The fisher ghost wordlessly offers their elbow and croaks out a joke “after you then, sir,” doing a short bow and all.

He quietly laughs and moves to take their other arm. Okay with accepting their help now. Once he's stable enough, he silently apologizes to Riviera, “I'm sorry, for pushing you like that. I… I don't know why it irked me so much to see that.”

They hum noncommittally, and he doesn't know whether to take that as a warning not to say anything else or keep talking, but he stays silent. As much as he'd like to say more, but they start walking, and he struggles to keep up as they help him get used to being on his feet again.

Their synchronized footsteps endlessly loop in his head as they go back and forth repeatedly for the past hour or so. Even the small breaks they take aren't enough to break the monotony of it; Riviera having yet to really speak to him beyond simple answers, humorless jokes, or commands. Anytime Danny trips, Riviera tightens their grip without saying a word, and waits for him to fix himself.

As they take another loop inside the shanty, he taps on their arm to stop, so he can take a break.

He catches his breath, and looks over at the door window next to him. He can hardly see out there; it's just dark red, and nothing else.

Curious, he nudges Riviera to get their attention and asks, “we're on Styx, right? That's a Greek river, isn't it?”

The ghost nods, “yup. Waited 'ere, 'cause the river's generally calmer than th’others.”

He fidgets under their gaze, choosing to fiddle with his gloves instead of returning their sharp attention. He continues, “so it's only gonna get worse from here on out, jeez… do you know where they all lead?”

Riviera lolls their head as they stretch. They spare him a look, “nope.” They answer plainly.

Danny quirks an eyebrow and finally looks up, “that's all ya got for me? There has to be *something* . Like, uh, I don't know… Hell?”

“Keep askin' me ‘bout it, an' I might just take ya there.” they say, but he can’t tell from their dry tone if they’re being entirely serious or making fun of him.

An awkward silence permeated the space between then, and it makes Danny sweat anxiously in place. Riviera was seemingly unaffected by it, however, until a loud sigh they were hoarding in their chest came out. Turning into a loud frustrated groan.

The fisher ghost growled and abruptly pointed a finger to his chest as they said, “it’s yer Obsession, *that’s* what’s tickin’ ya off, ghoulie. It must be somethin’ like protection or justice, given’ how ya were

actin'. It makes ya act out if ya don't engage wit' it."

'Obsession.' now that rang familiar to him. He vaguely understood what they were talking about.

He went along with it, "… I know, I just forgot the word for it."

"… But that's no excuse for bothering you about it, I'm sorry again."

Riviera scoffed, "no, Danny. *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't've yelled at ya, when yer th'one who doesn't know, obviously. But now that we know, we can work wit' this, actually."

They watched him perk up at their statement, "How so?"

They scratched their chin in thought, "if ya figure out yer Obsession again, that might be strong enough to tell ya what's the key to fixin' yer Core an' achieve peace. I… *believed,* you were still grievin' yer death an' that's why y'got all messed up. But after I thought 'bout it, n'our fight, I realized that maybe ya *are* grievin– but not entirely just fer yerself. Like ya got unfinished business,"

Riviera paused to study him again, "An– there's the way we found ya n'the Sea; I think yer injuries were *post-mortem,* but I couldn't tell because of yer broken Core. None of what I saw makes any sense, but I do know fer a fact, you *were* a ghost before ya became a Lost Soul."

They took a breath, "meanin' yer Core was fully developed, an' ya passed on. But somethin' happened to crack it an' let the Sea claim you. Yer Obsession could tell us what did ya in an' fulfill any last wishes."

Danny stewed in his thoughts, "… because my Obsession can tell me what I was working on before I got here," he finished.

Obsessions were a ghost's closest tie to their inner self, the you that you are. What motivates a person to keep going and preserve what made a person unique amongst the rest. Of course: Obsessions were like a monkey's paw. Ghosts are so driven to chase this one defined image of themselves, in fear of forgetting their lives–that in a tragic twist of fate, they lose everything else that made them who they were.

However, that last bit wasn't what they were most worried about; both Danny and Riviera were still young enough ghosts that they wouldn't evolve into Spirithood yet, and they'll likely stay like that for at least a millennium.

Give or take; depended on whether their respective Obsessions could stand the test of time.

But for right now, without his Core; Danny's mind and body is fractured. His Obsession was the last fraying thread tethering all the pieces together, like the disassembling white cotton sleeve of an intricately embroidered blouse. All they have to do is to reinforce thread and tighten the loose stitches.

So by focusing on what matters to him most, then he'll likely be able to easily connect to what he was doing before, and what broke him in the first place to fix the issue, along with purifying his corruption.

Which is much easier to deal with than a Lost Soul with an immature and malformed Core, having never developed an Obsession to persist very long in the Infinite Realms.

Riviera was lost in their mind until Danny's voice interrupted them, “you're right about it being some mix of protection and justice… but I still feel like that's just too. Simple. I guess.”

They shrugged, “most Obsessions are. Humans, bein’ *alive,* are too complex t'neatly fit into any category. But, we still like t'try an' do so anyways; doesn't matter if we're livin' or dead, we still try to have one thin’ to define ourselves wit’ in order to belong.”

They frowned to themselves, “or be accepted by…”

He breifly sympathized with them listening to their words. It did make him consider further, though, “maybe it's my… family? No, that doesn't sound right, but I think I *do* care about them, whoever they are.”

“That makes sense, however, if t'was just whoeva ya deem family, it wouldn't make sense for ya to care about lil ol' me so much– a stranger. And don't tell me ya don't, when ya clearly do, buckaroo.”

They teased.

He rolled his eyes, but the blush on his cheeks was still clearly noticeable as they still giggled at him. He bushes them off, “um! T-thats just because you remind me of my sister Jazz!”

“Sister, hmm?”

“Yeah! Jazz! I remember her now. She's my big sister… I love her a lot,” his voice turned regretful, “but I think I broke a promise I made to her…”

Riviera's heart twisted at the implications, “what was the promise?”

“… That I'd make it back safe.”

Outside, the River Styx, the Spirit, wrestled and wagged war within itself. An infallible rage boiling the bloody waters under the *S.S.Stardust's* wooden hull, staining the cold brown warm and with iron. Both ghosts inside scrambled to keep their balance as the Spirit assaulted the small shanty in her fury.

Crimson hands clawed, scratched, and gouged deep into wood, doing all in their power to capsize and drown its passengers from the inside out.

“Oath breaker,” cursed Styx, **“The Phantom is an Oath Breaker!”**

“Give me the OATH BREAKER!”

8. Styx: Blood in the Water, Part 2

Summary for the Chapter:

> Riviera shields their head uselessly as the last stalactite falls above them.
>
> “Riviera!”
>
> Cold hands push Riviera out of the way, and another body replaces them.
>
> They watch as Danny stands above them with glowing hands and eyes, his pretty snow-white hair now a Stygian dark red from all the rain.
>
> A bright green, ectoplasmic energy shoots from his hands and explodes the stalactite above into harmless steaming bits.
>
> He turns back to look at them and offers his hand, “are you alright?”
>
> Wordlessly, they accept his help and are too stunned to respond; no one has ever… saved, them before.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Warning for some graphic depictions of... gore? and some injuries, and implied murder. though i don't think its as intense as it sounds since its use more as a horror, creepy monster design.

“GIVE ME THE OATH BREAKER!”

“Shit! Daph, grab onto somethin'! An' don't come out till I tell ya! ” Riviera rushed to grab their large oar, and a thin curved knife from

their wooden chest.

“‘Don't come out’? Are you crazy?! There's no way I'm gonna leave ya to fight whatever's out there by yourself, especially not with the world's smallest knife!”

Riviera twisted to dissuade him but was cut off by another screech.

“GIVE ME THE OATH BREAKER, GIVE ME PHANTOM!”

The ghost felt a twinge of fear go down their spine; they've never witnessed Styx so *furious* like this before. At least, not to them. The rivers were never this hostile before, leaving all their grievances with the Sea of Soul instead.

A strong wave racked the boat, nearly tipping them both over. Danny reached to hang on to the swinging hammocks, and Riviera steadied against the desk. Their pots and pans clamored as they hit the flood, barrels tipped over and spilled their food and water supplies.

“GIVE INTO ME, REST IN ME. RETURN TO ME. PHANTOM… FISHER KING!”

Riviera, thoroughly annoyed, slammed a fist into the wall and yelled back, “Abuelo s'not ‘ere, Styx! I swear on th'Ancients, if ya break mi'boat I *will* find the Ferryman an' sick his ass on ya!”

Their anger went unanswered, ignored, as the Styx continued to ravage the small boat.

“OATH BREAKER…!”

The river gave them no option then. Riviera snarled and grabbed onto Danny's arm to drag him behind them.

“Stay close to me, *don't say anything that'll piss her off,* got it?”

“Whoa– slow down! Glass bones, Hulk! Remember?”

The fisher ghost rolled their eyes as they kicked open the door, letting blood rain deluge on them both. If the Styx's war cries and violence were vicious before, *it was much worse outside.*

Screeching with a thousand different voices; none of them hers, with the blood of millions, all of it hers.

The *S.S.Stardust* was taking a beating; with bloody handprints slapped and stamped all across the hull and a few even on board the deck. Various limbs, most of which were human, attacked the small boat on all sides. All of them were in different stages of decay; from bone dry, freshly buried, to half rotted. Some an unholy combination of a raptor's claws, or scabbed in scales.

Only years of being travel hardened was Riviera capable of holding back a retch of their own bloodied water. The smell was unbearable. A mixture of decaying corpses permeated the air.

Where once there was a stinging smell, even overwhelming at times, iron. It was now rotted meat, bog water, and coagulated blood, pus, and other bodily fluids.

The noxious gasses alone would have killed them a second time had they not already been a ghost.

But Riviera wished they could die that second time; paralyzed with a painful migraine and ringing ears by all the screams. It was beyond overpowering. All they could do was cover their ears and grit their teeth. Green blood slowly trickling out of their open orifices.

Behind them, Danny was in much worse condition; hunched over with a death grip on their arm, pale, and green in the face. He gags and holds a hand to his face to stop his lunch from climbing up his throat. Bright green ectoplasm flows nonstop from his nostrils.

Riviera's heart burned in regret at the sight of him; they were the one to drag him out here shortly after hearing the commotion. But he wasn't ready to be outside the boat interior's protective spell yet, if the Styx didn't take him he'd surely be lured in by the Sea's more distant, but persistent calls again.

“OATH BREAKER! OATH BREAKER!”

Riviera cried out and fell down onto one knee as another soundwave rippled across the river. Dropping their weapons. The cavernous sky

above, only echoing Styx's wails like a deafening warning siren.

They crane their neck up and see it; *Styx's Spirit, Vow and Promise.*

It's a mangled and torturous existence, even just *looking* at it, Riviera feels whispers of being skinned alive and breaking bones.

It's absolutely gigantic, a mound of bleeding flesh and bone rises out of the river, with imprints of hands, claws, fins, and paws stretched behind leathery thin patches of skin; as if all the creatures behind it are attempting to carve their way out from its stomach. Multiple bones even manage to spear past tear agitated open sores on Styx's surface.

The higher up, and it takes a more discernible shape. A bony spine and wilted feather wings stretches along its back, with a sharp rib cage protecting exposed organs. A human heart beats inside, with black charred lungs, an ulcer lined stomach, a dead ectopic pregnancy filled with grotesqueries, and the entrails of other beasts hang just over her belly.

On top of everything; a cleanly preserved severed head of a smiling, pretty young woman, with milky eyes and auburn hair. The only thing connecting it to her body being vocal cords and throat.

She reminded Riviera of a Manananggal.

When she speaks, a bright light emanates from her mouth. A sun-like, orange glow shining from a round object in her gullet; her Core.

“GIVE UP OATH BREAKER, SUCH WEAK CHARACTER DOES NOT BELONG ON THE STYX”

“SUCH A SIMPLE PROMISE. BUT PROMISES HOLD AN UNBEARABLE WEIGHT EQUAL TO THAT OF ATLAS' BRUDEN.”

“YOU ARE NOT THE TITAN YOU HOPE TO BE.”

The Styx wailed towards the sky, breaking the sharp stalactites above and sent them careening down right at them.

“Riviera, look out!” They hear Danny warm as the first stalactite hits

the water, the big splashes make the boat sloush around and bump out of control. Another nearly hits them and washes the deck with squeamish inducing gore. Warning debris hits the shanty and leaves holes in its wake.

Riviera shields their head uselessly as the last stalactite falls above them.

“Riviera!”

Cold hands push Riviera out of the way, and another body replaces them.

They watch as Danny stands above them with glowing hands and eyes, his pretty snow-white hair now a Stygian dark red from all the rain.

A bright green, ectoplasmic energy shoots from his hands and explodes the stalactite above into harmless steaming bits.

He turns back to look at them and offers his hand, “are you alright?”

Wordlessly, they accept his help and are too stunned to respond; no one has ever… *saved,* them before. And his powers. It looks like he was much more powerful than that thought.

'I can barely hover, let alone do that.' they look at him in wonder.

“Uh, Riviera?”

They escape their stupor upon recognizing his concern expression, “yeah, mm' fine, thanks. Nifty power ya got there, Buckaroo.”

The other ghost nods and stretches his hands open palmed, “when Styx called me Phantom it brought it all back; I'm a hero, *I know it,* and I'm not gonna let you fight this thing for me when I can fight back.”

Riviera chews their lip, but eventually agrees. They're not a fighter, and they're not as strong as any other ghost would be. Taking on the Styx alone was asking for trouble. But Riviera would have done so regardless.

Still, to be offered that help without asking? They would be lying if they didn't appreciate it.

“Okay! You've convinced me, but Styx isn't someone we can win so much as *convince.* Now she's callin' ya *oath breaker,* an' ya told me about Jazz–”

“Wait, why would she get mad over that?!”

Riviera glared, “oh, I dunno, maybe 'cause ya even admitted to breaking that promise yerself?! Its obsession is literally about promises.”

Danny looked painted, “well. I mean, yeah, I said I'd go back safe but–”

“OATH BREAKER…”

“— That doesn't mean I've *actually* broken my promise! I still intend to go back! I have to anyways.” He finished, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Riviera balked, “*how?!* Ya can't just escape the rivers, let alone the *Sea of Souls,* like it's nothing! The dead can't just swim on back to the Living like silly ol' Salmon!”

Danny gave them a smug grin, “says who? Has anyone even *tried* going up the rivers before? I bet you'll all feel real dumb when I do it.”

“Y-you…!” Riviera stared at him dumbfounded at his thought process. There were just so many rules broken and factually incorrect statements in that–

‘He acts as if he can do the impossible!’

“HYPOCRITE! HYPOCRITE! THE PHANTOM LIES! FOR, HOW CAN YOU SAVE SOMEONE ELSE, IF YOU CAN'T SAVE YOURSELF?”

“Are you blind, ya damn fruit loop?! I literally just saved Rivi! Catch up already!”

“BLOOD MUST BE PAID IN BLOOD!”

“TO ABANDON HER SOUL, YET NE'ER A WORRY TO RETURN HOMESTEAD POSTHASTE,”

“OATH BREAKER! SHE BLEEDS STILL IN YOUR PLACE, A UNPAYABLE DEBT, YOU DARE TO REPLACE? YOU UTTER DISGRACE.”

“GUILTY BE THY NAME, PHANTOM,”

“RENOUNCE YOUR BLOOD!”

Danny scowled at the river's grotesque persona, “I did *not* abandon her! Don't you *dare* put words in my mouth, who the hell gave you the authority over my promises to Jazz? That's between me and her!”

The river screeched and sent a wave of blood right at them, which he froze instantly. It cracked and shattered into sparkling pink ice under the water.

He huffed. Danny was *exhausted.* First from walking, now for overusing his rusty powers. He didn't want to scare Riviera, but he doubted he could keep this up long.

“Styx isn't someone we can win so much as convince.”

“PHANTOM… OATH BREAKER…! YOU DARE DEFY THE STYX?”

‘There's that name again: Phantom… that's right! I'm here to fight for everyone!’

“Styx! Just listen to me! Stop attacking us and let me explain!” He tried to reason with the river, putting his hands down as a way to show he didn't want to fight. But Styx was far too angry for discussion.

“PHANTOM. REST IN ME. GIVE IN TO ME. REPENT FOR BREAKING YOUR OATH, FOR YOUR SIN. ONLY THE STYX CAN WASH AWAY THE DEBT.”

With each scornful accusation, the river's waters grew more powerful. Becoming dangerous rapids, nearly capsizing the boat and spilling more liquid ruby onto the deck.

“Ugh, really?” They can hear Danny grumble.

Riviera attempts to respond, but they notice the shaking door just behind him, “DAPHNE LOOK OUT THE DOOR!”

Their warning is just in time, as he jumps away just as large barrels steamroll out like boulders on an avalanche, threatening to crush him.

They can hear him struggle as he says, “I'm okay! Just, ugh, my leg really didn't like that!”

They let out a concerned breath when they see he's fine for now, knowing those barrels most definitely would have shattered his glass like body.

However, not all is well, as a skeletal hand breaches rotting water and maims Riviera's calf. It tears clean through thick jeans and leather boots and pierces the ghastly flesh underneath.

They yelp, tripping over and landing on their back. Gloved hands flail as they desperately try to grab onto anything they can reach to keep them from being dragged back under, but rope and even the lifeline slipped from out of their hands.

“No! nononononono–! *Please, please Let me go!* Not again!”

Riviera is seeing their life flash before their eyes again; only instead of rough hands digging into their throat and murky, dirty, water, it's–

‘A cold pistol to my head, I'm on the docks, with hard cement blocks chained to my feet. Marco's tellin' me I'm gonna sleep with the fishes tonight. The air is salty, and the water is dark navy, almost black. This is how it ends, and I regret every second that passed before it.’

‘No it's not, I'm at the pool party with my mommy. It smells like chlorine and it's crystal blue! He was drowning in the deep end and I wanted to help, but I can't swim too good. He's scared, and he's pushing me under. Where is she? Why isn't she looking at me? Mommy help! I'm sorry I went in the deep end. I don't want to be a hero anymore!’

‘Actually, before, we called it all cholera. It was the 'Blue Death' because it turned yours and my skin cold blue. It was utter agony. But I am one of the lucky ones, dying in hours instead of days, but I expel from both ends and my body won't stop cramping. I just want it to end. I don't deserve this, my only sin was being born on the wrong side of the fence. Where the water was brown, and the smell was putrid.’

‘In truth. I was too dutiful; too proud and too stubborn. The holy chalice was in MY position. MY protection. I was so blinded by promises of endless milk and honey rivers, I never thought of holy water; for why would a king ever drink tasteless, clear water when he can drink bittersweet, dark wine?’

“RIVIERA! Hold on, I'm coming to you!”

Riviera's vision is flooded with tears, and they can't see anything but evil scarlet. The hand on their ankle sears last and leaves its mark with every passing second. Riviera's disgusting wrinkling washerwoman's skin peels off with each tug and kick aimed at the skeleton's hand.

It feels like a layer of caked mud, pruning and itchy peeling sunburnt dead skin being washed away with a sharp pumice stone.

The brittle skeleton scrapes their own obsidian bones; it isn't painful, but it leaves them grossly exposed. Green ectoplasm mixes with old blood and invades the open wound.

Were the blood not already made from that of dead bodies, their ghostly makeup would have had a more volatile reaction. A living person's blood would have given them an infection.

Riviera has a death grip on the edge of the boat as all this happens; using all their strength just to hold on long enough for Danny to reach them.

They finally focus their attention on his careful approach. They can't help but beg him as he gets closer, “Danny help!”

“I'm almost there! Just keep your eyes on me, Rivi!” He tries to comfort them.

Styx has other plans however,

“LIAR! YOU LIE STILL! WHAT OF EVERYONE? WHAT OF THE FOUNTAIN? OF DEAR *FONTES?* OATH BREAKER!”

More debris falls from the sky, but they watch Danny take no head. Instead, aiming an open palm and towards the hand gripping their leg, “duck!” He warns.

Riviera does as he says without question, and a hot ecto-beam passes their dark hood. Blasting the bony hand into splinters, freeing them.

Their savior is fast to move: yanking them by the hood and back onto the deck, as far away from the edge as possible. Riviera's dirty pants track the undead sludge behind them in a neat line. Dirtying their surroundings more.

They push themselves into their knees once more and tackle Danny close into a strong hug, feverishly whispering, “thank you, *oh my god,* thank you,” over and over again.

They sniffle and lightly sob into his shoulder. Danny comfortingly rubs circles into their back and tries to calm them down.

“Hey, hey, it's okay! I've got 'cha, you're okay.” He tells them. Although they can feel how tense he is underneath, with an irritated buzz coming off his core, and the thick, pungent smell of ozone of his body and clothes almost suffocating them.

But they didn't mind, and welcomed it even. It was a much better experience to hear the screaming voices of the damned and smell of rotting bodies.

And if one were to look into Danny's mind, you'd find he found comfort in their own petrichor scent, and the familiar smooth latex of their coat.

Faintly, he whispered in their ear, “I remember what's so important now, *Fontes,* I'm looking for Fontes.”

Riviera's Core pulsed at the name, “but why that?”

“I need it, to save *everyone.* My Core was broken while I was looking for it, I think.”

With that, he gently let them go, and walked to the front of the boat and facing off with Styx.

“PHANTOM. YOU BELONG TO ME, NOT TO FONTES, OATH BREAKER. YOU, WHO VOWS ON HIS MORALS, WHERE IS YOUR JUSTICE IN SEEKING FONTES? INSTEAD OF SEEKING FORGIVENESS?”

The ghost in front of them took a deep breath, and *Wailed,*

“SHUT UP! AND LISTEN TO ME!”

At once, his voice echoed all around and brought Styx to a stop.

Riviera groaned as they took the time to recover, breathing in cleaner iron than necrosis. The grotesquerie was eerily still. Though blood and pestilence continuously oozed from their painful existence.Her face was neutral, instead of hell-painted or cheery. She waited.

No one dared break the calm first.

A sigh passed Danny's lips, and he said this to her first,

“Thank you, for stopping.”

Her voice was much lower than before, slow and seemingly

innocuous. Like a black tar pit waiting for you to make a mistake," Phantom… you are an oath breaker, like so many before. What makes you believe you are better than those who have tried to cross Styx before?"

Danny stares her right in the eye, "you've got it all wrong, lady, I'm *not* better than anyone. I'm just a kid who wants to look out for his town. Y'know, with great power comes great responsibility? Ring any bells?"

"So *don't* put words in my mouth, like I said alread! You really oughta watch that bad temper of yours," he scolded the Spirit.

Styx observes him. Her heart had slowed down, it was only now both ghosts had noticed now that it was quiet.

"Temper… yes. The Styx is no place for the weak hearted, for I carry the blood that once beaten in your body. The Living World is so cruel, it marks me with its burden. Atlas, my lover. Atlas, my enemy. For Prometheus and Pandora's bastard children, I prepare them for last hardship before glory; *Everlasting Peace."*

"To know peace, you must free yourself of lies, of dishonesty, and the anguish from carrying unfulfilled promises."

Riviera is left breathless at Styx's words, taking seize of their lungs.

"…but you Phantom? You have yet need of peace; instead, you seek beloved Fontes. That is what enraged me."

Danny shifted from one foot to the other, "thought so, after all, there's no good reason to go after the Fountain of Youth, huh?"

Styx rumbles, "no. Fontes, our mother, our father, our sister, and brother. And those in-between. From which life itself once sprouted from; and still flows within every soul and river of us damned and wicked. They are not to disturb. For they maintain a careful balance."

"Every soul that has sought Fontes, met the maker they so desperately sought to avoid."

"Such is the flow of time, and the nature of the Living and the

Dying.”

Styx's cryptic speech floated in the air, heavy with meaning.

Danny considered her words, before turning to face Riviera, “I know you said I need to accept that I'm dead and finish my Journey, but I *need* to find Fontes. I *have* to save everyone, no matter what it takes.”

Riviera looked away from him, unable to see why anyone would choose the Living world and all its misery instead of the peace Styx was offering. Even this mission would be too great a task for them to help with, going after the Fountain was asking for an eternity of strife.

But…

They remember his determination to help and save them multiple times now. He never gave up on learning more about their shared Realm, or to recover his memories to move on with their initial assumptions of his fate.

Riviera finds it inspiring, and terrifying at the same time.

He has a determination and will to grow only the Living should have. It didn't make any sense.

But when did anything in the Infinite Realms do? Riviera had yet to see all it could offer them, it seemed.

“No rest for us wicked then, Ghoulie, I promise I'd help ferry ya an' I'd like to think mm’ true to my words. You're really gonna be the second death of me.” They finally admitted, growing more assured in their decision upon seeing him smile.

'If you have the ability to help, why not? Besides, help one, an’ you can help yourself.'

Although they wanted to return to their peaceful forgetfulness again, they wanted to spend time with Danny more.

There was just something… endlessly fascinating about him, even if

he frustrated Riviera to no end.

“I knew I could count on you, Rivi,” Danny says.

It feels good to know that.

Styx speaks, “despite my warnings, you still pursue Fontes? Foolhardy, but your Core, regardless of how broken, rings true with promise. It is an admiral quality only the Living should possess, Phantom. You were right to admonish me for an Oath not my concern, Thus, I will impart my hidden knowledge with you, if you swear to me an Oath and receive it as reparation for my… ‘Temper’, as you put it.”

A comfortable silence filled the air as both parties deliberated over the offer. Ultimately, Danny agreed and listen to the horrifying river.

“Very well, Phantom. Upon me, Styx, Vessel of the Bloodless and Keeper of Oaths. Do you so solemnly swear to discover and recover beloved Fontes, and deliver your justice as perceived? Beloved Fontes, the Vessel of Life and Recycler of Souls, who has vanished from their rightful position at the Mouth of the Sea? Vow to me, that you will recover Fontes and their personas as part of your Journey.”

Danny held Riviera’s hand in assurance, “I promise, Styx.”

The river’s persona accepted his word, dissolving into her Stygian depths once more and out of sight. She leaves behind a powerful wave in her wake, and bloodied hands once more grace along the hull. Only this time, they push the *S.S.Stardust* forward to Cocytus. Her disembodies Wail informed;

“FROM FONTES WE FEED, BUT THEIR MILK HAS SOURED AND CORRUPTED THOSE WHO DRINK FROM THEM. THE SHADES THE FERRYMAN GUIDES AND REAPER CULLS CANNOT PASS IN THESE TREACHEROUS WATERS, TAKE MIND OF US SISTER SPIRITS OF EREBUS. ON LETHE, BE MINDFUL AND FIND MNEMOSYNE. SHE WILL HELP YOU FIND BELOVED FONTES.”

“ALL IS NOT AS IT SEEMS, PHANTOM, FISHER KING.”

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading! I have more danny art on my tumblr @bluest-planet if U wanna drop by and chat. Just know I talk n post other stuff than dp in there too!